

## Our Original Family Story: Paradise Lost<sup>1</sup>

Sunday, Lent 1, March 1, 2020

### I

Every family has its stories, don't they? You know, how Grandma and Grandpa met, how Mom and Dad survived the Great Depression. My mom in fact spent a lot of time working on our family tree – with a Confederate soldier here and a little country store owner there ... a grandfather I never knew who'd been a “philanderer from the word go,” finally traced to a little town on the Ohio river.

Well, I think we're all fascinated with these family stories, these characters ... good or bad ... stories that I think also tell us a lot about ourselves, about where we came from, about our place in the world. They matter to us. These players ... 'cause somehow I think they tend to explain us – where we came from. I mean, these are my people and that's how they lived ... these are my roots.

And in the telling of these family stories, I think we also rediscover that there's nothing really new under the sun. You and I are simply the most recent players in the age-old drama of life and death – that drama that binds us to every other human being who ever walked on this earth.

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Which brings me to our Genesis story this morning, of the garden of Eden – one of our ancient family stories. One that I think also tells us some fundamentally true things about you and me ... about ambition and appetite, about betrayal and alibis, about curiosity and daring and about how blindly you can make a life-changing decision ... a no-going-back decision ... that can change the whole course of your entire life. And I think it also tells you how sorry you can be once you see what you've done ... when it's way too late.

Now we didn't get the whole Adam and Eve story this morning, but I bet most of us know it anyway ... heard it as children probably. How the snake lured Eve and how she gave in to temptation and then how she led Adam astray ... and how they got thrown out of that garden and all. And then somewhere along the line, some Sunday school teacher or someone tacked on a moral line or two, like “so obey your elders, or you'll get in a heap of trouble!” Or maybe later on, you might have heard other lessons drawn from this ancient family tale, like Adam's sin was the original one ... the Original Sin ... and it was all downhill from there ... that we all inherited a kind-of congenital taint, infected with some kind of germ leading to death if you weren't on your holy best behavior!

But the trouble is that neither of these readings ... not the moral reading or the Original Sin reading ... neither of these readings is true to the text. 'Cause nowhere in the Bible do you find the words “fall” or “original sin” ever linked to this Garden story. No, I think both of these ideas were read into the story much later, by scholars trying to interpret this ancient family tale. And so they drew lessons for us humans so we wouldn't keep falling again and again and destroying each other in the process.

But see. This family story itself is not concerned with such things. No, this story's actually about God and about humans, and it's about making choices and it's about surviving with the choices you've made. It's one of those family stories that tells you things about yourself that you need to know ... not only how you fail, but also how you survive. 'Cause survival is part of this family story, too.

See, Adam and Eve didn't die at the end of this little tale. No ... they went on. But how did they go on? I think that's what you and I want to know ... or at least I think that's the point of this particular family story of ours. How did they go on after they made their bad choice, how did they survive east of Eden ... after they defied God ... God. ... Not only their Maker but their Friend. How did they live through the loss of Paradise? How did they fashion a future out of the choices they'd made out of the mess they'd made of what they'd been given?

That's what I want to know ... and I think that's what this story's all about.

## II

Now when I say the word "paradise," what comes to your mind? I mean, even for those of us who haven't been there, I think the word conjures up a sense of peace and bliss and even innocence, with nothing to hide and so no fear of discovery. No fear ... no shame. See, this guy who wrote Genesis describes it in his own way as a place where you could walk around without a stitch on. Innocent ... safe ... as long as you lived within the bounds God set. I mean, it was a place where everything was whole, everything was holy, where, as someone said, "nothing had ever been broken or dented or scarred or scratched."

But you know the story. You know how it goes. Eve has her debate with the snake, bites into that forbidden fruit and nothing is ever whole again. Paradise is lost in the blink of an eye and there's absolutely no going back. Period.

And they run. Oh, how they run! Oh how they hide, trying to cover up their nakedness ... their shame. 'Course now God comes looking for them, calling out in the cool of the evening, "Where are you?" And when He finds them, why they let those alibis fly! Adam blames Eve for handing him the fruit, Eve blames the snake for tricking her ... and they both lose their integrity at the point of a finger, frantically trying to cover their exposure, failing miserably in the process.

And so God speaks the consequence: Pain for Eve, toil for Adam ... dust to dust ... ashes to ashes. Paradise lost. Just like that! With no going back. And of course, God is right. I mean, God's warned them, warned them what would happen. They'd been warned. Sin ... and consequence.

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Still, what a loss! And you know how that is, don't you? I mean, you give in just once to a crazy impulse, one brief fling, one impetuous temptation ... you look away from the stoplight for one brief second, you let a lie slip out of your lips to cover your rear, you send one nasty, hasty e-mail ... and the relationship ends, the job disappears, the car crashes, the friendship is just dead.

And there's no going back. Paradise is lost, and what was ... what could have been ... all that might have been ... is gone with it forever. And so how do you go on? How do you survive from there? Well, we all know some typical ways that folks go on from there. And maybe you've tried one or two.

First, you can blame someone else for what's happened to you. In Eve's case it was the snake. But at any rate, you get to be angry and that feels real good ... better than being scared. And if someone else has ruined your life, why, it's up to them to fix it ... which lets you just sit around and wait, stoking up the resentment. Or you can blame yourself and punish yourself, over and over, keeping track of a whole list of your failures on a little scorecard till you stop keeping count and

shut down altogether. Or you can run like hell, and push yourself mercilessly, unforgiving and unrelenting in your self-punishment, forever making up for that unforgivable mistake you made back then.

Or you can blame God ... 'cause after all, who made the snake in the first place? And if He wanted us to be so good, how come He made us this way? Or you can just sour-grape it ... who wanted that stupid Garden to begin with?



Well, back to Adam and Eve: How did they go about surviving after Paradise lost? Well, apparently there are a whole host of legends about these two ... the aftermath, if you will ... stories that didn't quite make it into the Good Book.

For example, one story has the pair dwelling in a cave east of Eden ... despairing ... begging God to let them back into the Garden. And when they hit rock bottom – as the story goes – and were freezing to death without a stitch on – they decided to let God teach 'em how to sew, making clothes for themselves.

Now this was a very very big step indeed. 'Cause having lost paradise, having run out of alibis and out of luck, Adam and Eve decided after all to live by letting God clothe them. And then an angel appeared and sang to them that night, “Fear not. The God who created you will strengthen you.” And so God did.

See, the Gardener – God – still loved His creatures. And so even when the facts warranted death, God gave them life instead. And so they did decide to do the best they could ... and live. 'Course, those prior days of peace and innocence were gone. But they got by. They got by. They managed to build an altar and they managed to build a little home. And they managed to bake a little bread and bear five children. As one writer said, “Using the pieces of their broken past, they made a life for themselves and a future for their descendants in the world outside of Eden.”



And of course this world outside of Eden is the world that you and I still live in, isn't it? Oh yes ... it's a world full of scratches and scrapes and scars. In fact, cracked ... but glued back together ... as someone said, “a testament to the God who's willing to work with broken pieces.”

### III

See, finally, I think this is your story and mine. A story with everything human in it: promise, failure, blame, guilt, forgiveness, healing, hope ... a story about you and me and a story about our God ... who didn't just create you once and forget you, didn't just toss you aside when you made that bad choice. No, this is the story of our God who goes on creating you, not just once but forever, putting your pieces back together so that you're "never ruined, never entirely ruined, and never, never ruined for good."

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This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday ... ashes to ashes, dust to dust. And as I was thinking about that, it occurred to me that, even for those of us who live to be 80 or 90, life is such a brief thing from birth to death. So what are you going to do with it? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? That ... is the question, folks. And that is the task for Lent. So ask yourself, "Now what? ... Now what on this side of Eden?"

See, the wonderful lesson from our family story here is that even if you've messed everything up, it's not too late. 'Cause this story reminds you and me that your wholeness does not lie behind you but ahead of you, in the company of the God who made you, who feeds you and clothes you, and who dwells among you this side of Eden ... till He brings you home.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>*Genesis*, by Walter Brueggemann (Interpretation series); Frederick Buechner's *Peculiar Treasures*, and *Synthesis* (for Lent 1, 2020).