

This morning's text is particularly difficult to handle. I spent the week considering how to approach this text, and even was fortunate enough to have time at the day centre to ask for their wisdom and opinions on the text.

We all agreed that this story is terrible. Adam blaming his wife, who doesn't even have a name yet in the story. God delivering terrible punishments down to those who were tricked. And the ultimate casting out. This does not feel like the God of love that we know and follow. So what gives?

I took some time this week to pull out my most powerful tools when reading the old testament. My Hebrew professors would often remind us that before this was ever the old testament it was the Hebrew Bible, it was the Tanak. Which is shorthand for the Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim or the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. This scripture has a separate faith story that is behind it. So I looked through the few books I have unpacked, and found my JPS Tanak, My Jewish Publication Society Hebrew Bible.

The Jewish theologians who have written in this Bible have highlighted a few pieces of this passage to me that I would share and pass on to you. So let's cover this story once again but focusing a little more on some moments we might have overlooked or understood differently.

The serpent we are told is the most shrewd of creatures, which stands in written contrast with the nakedness of the created humans. Only if you read the original Hebrew though. The word for Cunning is arummim and the word for shrew is arum. So in some ways the serpent is poised perfectly to be their adversary in this moment.

The serpent talks to the woman, and starts with a statement that is blatantly false. Did God really say You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden? He is setting her up for failure.

The woman, as she is still unnamed at the moment, responds with what she was told by Adam. We may eat of the fruits of the other trees of the garden, it is only the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said you shall not eat of it nor touch it or you shall die.

Now, this statement, is sort of right and sort of wrong. Adam was there in

chapter 2 verse 17 when God said, “but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” God does not prohibit touching the fruit, just eating it. Adam has miscommunicated, misunderstood, or just told the woman incorrectly. The serpent uses this misinformation as an exploit. She paraphrases the command to include touching the fruit, because she did not exist when the command was given.

The serpent says to her, you will not die, God knows that you will be like divine beings. Convincing the woman to take another look at the fruit on this tree. She noticed that it looks like good fruit, seems desirable, is pleasing to the eyes and so she takes one of its fruit. And the moment she lays her hands on it the mixed up commandment she was given feels invalidated and the serpent vindicated. Because she was under the impression that if you took the fruits in hand you would die right away. But the commandment is only for the ingesting of the fruit not the eating of it.

She eats the fruit, gives it to man, and they perceive themselves as naked something they did not before. God comes by and they play a little hide and seek inspired by shame and the blame game begins. Adam begins by throwing his new wife under the bus immediately. The woman you put at my side, she gave me of the tree and I ate.

Did you hear what Adam said in there? Not just that the woman gave him the fruit, but that in some ways this is really God’s fault because God is the one who put the woman at Adam’s side.

The woman, with some more credibility, puts the blame on the serpent. And so God punishes them in reverse order, the serpent, the woman, and the man. The man finally names his wife Eve, and they are clothed and cast out of the garden

Perhaps the re-contextualization doesn’t help the tone of the story as much as I might have promised at the top of this sermon. But it does a lot for me. A text that I was once under the impression fully put the blame on the woman, actually shows the woman of the story here as a victim and an individual who clearly articulated the serpent as primary perpetrator.

Adam, named because he is from the earth adamah, and it’s also the general name for man or humans. He is the one who was supposed to

share God's commands with Eve who is named Hawwah source of life. And when he does an imperfect job blamed her.

But in doing so is also blaming God. God who made her to be with him. Even her name, is from the same phonetic root of haya, which means to live, but more importantly perhaps is the same root of the tetragrammaton God's holy name. Yod, hey, vav, hey. God is the one who gave her to him, and in Adam's blame of her he is also blaming God. Which feels like an incredibly human thing to do.

It feels like a very relatable moment to our current lives of faith as well. Trying to take what we have learned from God, what we have been commanded from God, and sharing it with others often results in miscommunications. An through this miscommunication of faith many people are hurt as a result, sometimes innocently sometimes intentionally.

In this text we see what is a situation with two innocent victims of a cunning serpent and their punishment is severe. The serpent will crawl on the ground eating the dust, the woman will have pains in child birth, and the husband will till the soil from which he came and to which he shall return, and the duo that is humanity must leave the garden.

But this story is not all bad. Sometimes we read this story and think how can our loving God who gave us Jesus be the same God in this story? But Jewish tradition notes that God's anger is not the final word in the divine-human relationship in this story especially. It ends with God clothing them before sending them out. God could have sent them out with their makeshift fig leaf garments, but instead God clothes them before sending them out.

Hebrew scholars see this unmerited kindness as an understanding of their faith and how we should live as humans. One talmudic rabbi remarked, "for the Torah begins with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness." God clothes the naked here at the start, and buries the dead at the end, meaning Moses.

Which is a lovely way to think about this text, that even in moments of our deepest betrayal, and hurt, God is still reaching out with kindness. Adam blames God for giving him Eve, Eve blames the serpent for tricking her into breaking the one rule they have. But blame lies in all directions.

It is in this tangled web of blame and confusion that we find God doling out punishment as a reaction to wrongdoing. Yet also giving with kindness one final gift of clothes to survive in the world outside.

Our God is a God of love yes, and always has been. It's just that God has shown this love in different ways. The Bible starts with a gift of undeserved kindness, in the gifting of clothes to those who have broken the connection to God, and the burying of Moses.

In many ways our New Testament starts the same. It begins with an undeserved gift in the form of a wee baby boy named Jesus. And ends in the burying of the dead Christ.

The good news of the text today, is that God is still a God of love and kindness. We may wind up being punished for mistakes we have made. Wrongs we have been tricked into committing. But God will not send us out unprepared, God will not abandon us in unkindness.

God is present with us from the beginning to the end, and will continue to give us the kindness and love that we have done nothing to deserve. And that's some good news.

This is the word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God
Amen

Rev. Austin Wicks