

Snake Eyes In Eden

Genesis 2:15-3:8

First Sunday in Lent, February 10, 2008

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One of the ways I prayerfully reflect on and research a passage of the Bible is to read what other preachers have had to say about it. It's kind of like how a business person may feel the need to read another business person's book for fresh perspectives and new angles. So I often seek out other people's sermons in order to help further discern and shape my own.

This practice is especially helpful when I've decided to preach on a text as familiar to most folks as the one we have before us today. The Garden of Eden narrative features very intense symbolism to choose from as a focus for our consideration -- there are wisdom-telling trees, rib reductions resulting in new birth, shame-sheltering fig leaves.

Oh, yes, and then there is the s-s-s-s-s-erpent.

What a powerful preacher that serpent was. It took hold of the word of God and offered up a very effective interpretation. I didn't say a *good and faithful* interpretation, just one that squarely hit the intended mark, exhorting dear old Eve and Adam to listen and obey. Did I mention how cautious and discerning I've got to be when reading other preacher's sermons? Suffice to say, it's that serpent which has caught my attention the most at the start of this 2008 Lenten season.

So I sought out some other voices on the subject of the serpent. Precisely because I believe most people have strong cultural assumptions about who or what that serpent really was, I found myself appreciating the words of the Rev. Sheila Gustafson, recently retired Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In a sermon from 1996, she had this to say --

"The original impulse to disobedience may have been external to the human, but

ever since, as history has amply demonstrated, the impulse has been from within. How convenient that we should blame the snake, or the devil, or our peer group, or our parents or anything outside of ourselves. It is in us to want to test the boundaries, to know whatever it is that we think is being kept from us, to control whatever has an influence on our lives. And, like Eve and Adam after her, the forbidden fruit is the very fruit that we know will taste sweetest.”

I’d say Rev. Gustafson has rather nicely put us right back in the Garden, squarely holding us accountable for our actions. She’s absolutely right ... it’s all too easy and it is indeed inherently within us to want to prop up a fall guy, a scapegoat, to displace blame for dumb, disobedient, self-disgracing behavior.

We are back in Eden whenever we think or say, half-joking or not, “the devil made me do it” instead of “I knew better and I did it anyway.”

We are back in Eden whenever we find ourselves soul-stirringly startled and unnerved by snakes, such as I was by the six-foot long jet-black rat snakes that would occasionally slither a little too close for comfort back when I was counseling at Camp Johnsonburg. Ah, nothing quite like needing to keep your calm at a Christian camp when Eden’s most infamous resident decides to drop in and find some warmth by the towels left alongside the dock.

And we are most definitely back in Eden whenever we can’t help but want to test a boundary in order to prove that we know better. To quote Rev. Gustafson once again, “There is something about the human which cannot accept being told ‘This far, and no further.’ If there is a limit imposed, there is a limit to be challenged.”

It’s important to grasp at any time of the year that God gave our first parents three incredible gifts – the gift of *life*, the gift of a *meaning* when they were made stewards of all creation, and then the gift of *free will*. It’s the *free will* offering that got most abused.

I believe God intended this third gift to be a real reflection of true, reciprocating love, which is rightly entered into through free choice instead of coercion. God didn't want us to be obedient puppets but obedient people. The strings were cut and we were called to dance in dependent trust and joy with God our Creator. But in that freedom, the temptation to transcend God's authority in favor of our own snuck up and sabotaged our souls. Want a definition of original sin? How about this – that which causes us to constantly sucker ourselves into believing we must and should transcend the significance of God's intimate, loving instruction in our lives.

Here's the thing, though, as much as I want to, I'm not about to let the serpent completely off the hook. The authors who collectively wrote the Book of Genesis clearly want us to pay attention to it. The way they want us to understand it, however, is less literal and much more symbolic. And this is done so by paying attention to the root meaning of the Hebrew word we translate as "serpent." It's a word that means "to enchant." So I invite you to hear Genesis 3:4 this way ... "The *enchanter* said to the woman, 'You will not die' ..." Symbolically speaking, then, the reason we originally sinned was because we were *enchanted* away from first and foremost trusting God with our lives.

Maybe it's because I'm from New Jersey, but when I think of "enchantment" and "serpents" and the "consequences of original sin" in the broad context of the world today, I find myself thinking about casino gambling. While I'm not at all attracted to spending my time and money this way, I do recall a time several years ago when Jenny and I visited – mostly out of curiosity – Trump's Taj Majal in Atlantic City. The whole design and décor of that place, I am convinced, has the purpose of enchanting its guests. Oh, it was glitzy and gaudy, but still somehow other-worldly and alluring -- mystical, even, in its invitation to invest one's self fully into it. The ease with which you could get more money from an entire bank of ATM's right inside the entranceway – *enchanting*.

The ease with which you could get alcohol from friendly, flirtatious staff – *enchanted*. The excitement of all the bold sights and sounds, from slots to roulette wheels to card snaps and slaps – *enchanted*. The whole place had an enchanting aura of “trust me, you won’t lose much by being here and trusting my temptations to believe in your ability to win big!”

Of course, how many of people trust that voice only to have everything come up ... you know ... “snake eyes.” I have no idea if this term so synonymous with losing has a root in this morning’s text of the Bible. But the parallel sure is striking! The serpent’s enchanting message (go ahead and picture it being delivered by the hypnotic-eyed snake from Disney’s *Jungle Book* if this will help) was basically, “Trust me ... go ahead and eat of the tree in the middle of the garden ... you’ll not only live, but you’ll be just as powerful and wise as God!” Talk about a high stakes gamble! Adam and Eve learned very quickly and to their tremendous shame, subsequently to ours as well, that believing in ungodly enchanters leads only to “snake eyes,” to becoming blind to the beautiful, blessed intimacy of living in complete harmony with God.

What are the unfaithful enchantments that seductively slither up to your free will? What times in your life have you gambled against God by foremost trusting in yourself or in some other worldly creation?

Lent is the liturgical run-up to our community proclamation about the One who stomped the enchanter’s head in holy, life-affirming victory. During this run-up, we need to ask hard questions of ourselves. We need to work on being truly penitent, on prayerfully, intentionally turning away from sin and its snake-eyed consequences. We need to whole-heartedly turn toward God in order to ask for forgiveness and homecoming. It’s the season for honestly acknowledging our limits, and trusting that all the limits preached to us through centuries of prophets and especially through Jesus were done for our own good and for the good of God’s precious world. May you

examine such blessed boundaries as you read the Scriptures, listen to preachers, and above all, listen to your heart instead of whatever nearby snake in the grass might be summoning you to its side. Amen.