

June 6, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Genesis 3:8–13, 20–21](#)

TITLE: One Step Back, Two Steps Forward

Why is the Garden of Eden story in the Bible? Some may tell you it is because that is how the world began, that it is a factual news report from the beginning of humanity's journey on Earth. Which is precisely the wrong answer. The Garden of Eden story is not a documentary; it's a story, a foundational myth, a parable. It's the answer to a young person's question, who is sitting one day by a wise grandparent, or (en Espanol) una abuela, por ejemplo, and asks, "Why is the world the way it is? Why is there beauty and pain, good as well as evil?" As an answer we are given the story about Adam and Eve, about paradise and a broken trust. We're told the story not because it is literally true, but because it is essentially true and it remains true for every one of us right now.

Recently a reporter asked a group of people, "What are you most looking forward to this summer, now that we can begin re-emerging from our pandemic isolation?" As you might expect, most of the answers named the excitement people felt over reconnecting with family and friends, of traveling to see toddlers and grandparents and being able to give them all a big hug. One woman ticked off the following wish list: *Going out without a mask. Taking in a movie that isn't on my television. Getting together with friends and families. Knowing that I will not make someone else ill. Enjoying life once again.*¹ As I thought about what this season means for me and for all of us, it felt a bit like we are all back in the Adam and Eve story—stepping out into a world that is no paradise, a place where we all have knowledge of good and evil, and where we have to choose what to do as we emerge once more to walk with God and one another.

So according to the ancient story, how did Eve and Adam handle this moment? Well, not very well—although, if we're honest, they did exactly what we've done on lots of occasions. Knowing they had betrayed God's trust in them, first, the two of them hid from God. When asked why they were hiding, they said, we were ashamed. When asked what caused this feeling of shame, they started to blame one another. Fear. Shame. Denial and blame. This last act, to borrow a baseball analogy, was a triple play of blaming. God throws the ball to Adam, asking why he's been disobedient. Adam initially blames God, but then tosses the ball to Eve—the woman who gave him the fruit. God asks Eve the same question and she blames the serpent, throwing the ball full speed at him. The serpent, well, he didn't have any hands to catch the ball so he's got nothing to say in his defense; the bases are cleared, and a loss is ensured for the home team.

The team of Adam and Eve is the team we play for. It's their uniforms we all wear. Granted, there are some wonderful things about humankind—our creativity; our ability to hope and dream; our capacity for sacrificial love. But there's no getting around the fact that we're also deeply flawed—we sin because we're afraid, because we're ashamed, because we don't want to take responsibility. So we throw the ball away trying to blame someone else - the other political party, the other race, gender or nationality, social media or plain ol' bad luck. It's like we take one step forward and then

fall two steps back. Adam and Eve thought they were making a good career choice by eating the forbidden fruit. But by doing so they broke a fundamental trust with God and ended up falling two steps back, naked and afraid in a place that could have been paradise.

The problem with thinking that the Garden of Eden story is literally true is that we end up focusing on the characters who look like us; we end up analyzing everything Adam and Eve did, watching the replays and wondering if they had only made different choices, things would have turned out much better for all of us. But that's nonsense. From the dawn of time, we have always eaten the apple. We have always been prone to wrong choices and sin, to fear and shame and blaming. That's just us—but that's not why we're told this Genesis story. We're told this story because of what it tells us about God.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God only speaks to Godself—announcing, “Let there be light” and saying “Let us make humankind in our own image.” In the second chapter, God makes statements: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper as his partner.” But only in chapter 3 does God ask a question of us—God invites us into dialogue, into relationship. Hiding in the garden, naked, vulnerable, ashamed, what does God ask? “Where are you?” In the cool of the garden, amid the beauty and wonder of life on earth, God's first question to us is “Where are you?”

Imagine for a moment that God is lovingly asking that of you right now. Where are you—as you're considering re-emerging from this pandemic, as you are feeling exhausted from bouncing off the walls of your home, from trying to keep your kids entertained... as you deal with depression from being socially isolated, from navigating the 24-7 pressures of work, and battling persistent anxiety about whether things will ever return to normal. Take a breath and imagine God's voice calling you by name and simply asking, “Where are you?” It's an existential question. God always knew physically where Adam and Eve were—even when they were hiding among the shadows in the garden. This wasn't a game of “Where's Waldo?” It was God asking them—asking us— “Where are you? How are you doing, my child, with whom I so long to be in relationship?”

After God's question came the comic dialogue, the triple play of shame and blame, followed by a couple verses of God reprimanding the home team. But in the story, what follows that? The woman, the help-mate, rather than receiving any lingering accusations about having taken the forbidden fruit, is lovingly named Eve—the fount of all life, the mother of all living, the one to whom we all owe our existence. And in the end, what does God do? Verse 21: *The Lord God made garments of skins for the man and his wife and clothed them.*

Over the past few weeks, the conversations I've had with people have often circled around the same themes. It feels odd to walk around without a mask. It is uncomfortable the first time you step into someone else's house or share a meal with friends or notice the sheer number of people now in the stores and on the sidewalks. It has been, and

continues to be, a hard season for us all—for parents, for the elderly and isolated, for those whose old 9-5 job now, thanks to email and Zoom, never seems to end. In addition, there remains the unfinished conversations about social justice—about where we are post-George Floyd in our racial reckoning as institutions and a nation; about global justice—as cyber-attacks continue, as missiles fall on Palestine, as wealthy nations have vaccines and poor nations face a third wave of infections. It’s like we are all worried that we are once again taking one step forward—one step out into the world, only to run into obstacles, racism, infections again—and will end up two steps back from where we started.

That’s why we need the Garden of Eden story. God calls to us, lovingly, desiring relationship—and speaks to our troubled souls with the question “Where are you?” As we seek to answer that question, we may well take a step back—falling back on old anxieties, old feelings of shame and low self-worth or even our tendencies to blame someone else. Yet God doesn’t let us stay there. Even when we take one step back, God takes two steps forward – toward us. God seeks us out—just like in the other stories of our faith: the good shepherd rescuing the one lost lamb; the wise woman not stopping until she finds the lost coin; the parent running to welcome home the prodigal child. God call to us—seeks us out—and then God clothes us, providing what we need, the right fit, the right garments, the right spirit.

Kathleen Norris once said, “Any relationship, to remain alive [and vibrant], requires at least two living participants.”² That is true for us as humans and it is true for us and God—us and a living, active God; a God who calls us, who is with us as we re-emerge from the shadows, who in Christ redeems us from our sins, who with the Holy Spirit shows us the way forward; a God who clothes us with what we need. For when we take one step back, this God, our God, always takes two steps forward toward us. Alleluia. Amen.

¹ Dani Blum, “What Are You Most Looking Forward to This Summer?”, *New York Times*, May 30, 2021, 4D.

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, 1998, p. 87.