

Genesis 3: 8-15; Mark 3: 19b-35 “Holy Kinship”

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’ The Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’

“The sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.” We’ve become so accustomed to the image of God who moved in the pillar of fire, who spoke from the mountain top and out of the clouds, with a voice that thundered, and the Holy Spirit, God’s very breath rushing through with a sound like a violent wind, we forget, that before all that, before God became hidden and distant and unapproachable, was a God who would take an evening stroll in God’s peaceable garden, in search of company; the company of the earthlings God had created in God’s very image.

But it is the evening, and the darkness is approaching; something is ending. And in the evening breeze, as pleasant as it may be, God senses something is shifting. God calls to the man “Where are you?” The man is not where God expects him to be but is “hidden” from God. Well, that’s new. Later on, we humans would lament that God is hidden from us, but apparently that wasn’t God’s original idea.

Then the man explains (the original “mansplaining) he hid because 1) he was afraid, for 2) he realized he was naked. Well, those things are new, too. Whether the man was afraid because he realized he was naked and therefore vulnerable, or he was ashamed to be naked before God, we are not told, but being afraid, anxious or ashamed; God had not made the man for those things. These things are not of God.

God had to ask, did you eat from the tree I told you not to eat? That was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That thing that was ending with the evening breeze was the innocence of man. Now there is something foreign to the man who had been made in the image of God.

The man responds, “the woman YOU GAVE to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate.” You notice how he divided the blame between God and the woman, practically saying “I’m only a victim of the mistakes you two made.” He thinks he’s being smart now that he’s eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. I don’t know where the expression “man up” comes from, but it’s not from this man.

Now, God asks the woman “what have you done?” and she says, “the serpent TRICKED me, and I ate,” readily admitting that the serpent was smarter, more powerful and stronger than her. As lame as these reasons for their actions are, they are at least partially true, if not the whole truth. The cause of the loss of their innocence is the serpent.

Setting the humans side for the moment, God turns to the serpent, not to ask question, not to engage in argument, but to simply and absolutely call him out on what he did, his part in causing this permanent breach in God’s peaceable garden as a habitat for humanity, the brokenness he caused in the wholeness of God’s household, and the distance he’s brought between God and God’s beloved earthlings, replacing the original intimacy and communion. For all that, God destined the serpent to eternal conflict with the humanity which the serpent will never prevail.

This story is a myth, and by that I don’t mean it’s just a made-up story that is not true. By myth I mean an ancient symbolic story where supernatural phenomenon conveys or points to a deeper spiritual truth. In this mythical story, the serpent is a symbol of the reality of evil forces that opposes God’s will for the world; the forces that resist and work against God’s loving intention for God’s creation and instead try to fill it with all what God did not intend, distorting the human hearts and relationships, and destroying the ecosystem of the world.

And the truth this story tells is the Lord God is still in charge, and God will prevail over Evil to restore the world to the wholeness God created it to be and God’s creation will live peaceably without fear or shame or blame, and it will be done through human acting on God’s behalf, through humans doing God’s will.

The confidence, trust, and hope we the disobedient and repentant humans have in this God, even when our world seems to be staring into the dark night of its soul, is beautifully expressed in Psalm 130, which is today’s psalm.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
 my soul waits for the Lord
 more than those who watch for the morning,
 more than those who watch for the morning.
 O Israel, hope in the Lord!
 For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
 and with him is great power to redeem.
 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Now, let's see what happened when God did enter into this changed world as one of us, to save us from the destructive influence of the serpent, to collapse the distance it created and bring us back to God's household, that we may again live without fear, in communion with God. Hear now, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark 3: 20-35. Jesus is in the early days of his ministry; he has just been healing and teaching an increasing crowd, and the religious authority of his time are increasingly alarmed.

Then he went home; 20and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' 22And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' 23And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? 24If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. 28 'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' — 30for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.' 31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' 33And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' 34And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

Welcome to the chaotic world of clashing characters and conflictive narratives. Jesus had just gone into a house after teaching and healing, and the crowds are just so drawn to him they follow him into the house so Jesus and his disciples can't even eat. When the word gets to his family that Jesus has gone out of his mind, they come to "lay hold" of him, to restrain him. We don't know if they were concerned for his safety or if they were afraid of their own reputation being tainted, or perhaps both; whatever the reason, what is clear is they want to make him stop.

Then the religious authorities accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. They recognize Jesus' power and authority, but it doesn't mesh with what they know, he doesn't operate in the way they think he should, so they label his power as Satanic.

If the Presbyterians were there, we, too, would have had hard time accepting Jesus because we believe in doing everything "decently and in order." The situation Jesus was creating was far from that.

Then, Jesus who is accused of having gone out of his mind actually goes out of his way to call his accusers to him, to engage them in thinking about what they're saying. He points out for them that they are the ones not making sense, calling his power that confronts Satan and casts out its minions Satanic. Jesus warns them that what they are doing is calling the work of the Holy Spirit Satanic, a blasphemy.

"Out of his mind; he's gone mad," says his family. "Demon-possessed," says the scribes. In their tradition, madness was the doing of "unclean spirit" and Satan was the demonic power at work against God's will for the world. They were unwittingly committing "eternal sin" that cannot be forgiven, by rejecting the very source of forgiveness and hence their own salvation.

But, even here, Jesus is not eternally condemning them personally. What is eternally condemned is this sin of rejecting the Holy Spirit, but the people are always invited to change their way. God continues to engage those under the power of opposition, the "strong man" who hold sway in the world, by sending one who is stronger.

Even when Jesus appears to ignore his mother and brother and sister, his blood-relatives, when they came asking for him, by doing so Jesus calls their attention to the truth that familial tie is not what binds them to Jesus; what binds them together as God's family is doing the will of God. They were standing outside the house Jesus was in, but nobody is keeping them outside but themselves. Everyone is invited into the household of God.

Doing the will of God in this world, proclaiming the good news, inviting those who would join the work, while dealing with the forces of evil, the demons of our day who are constantly undermining our work, is messy. It might feel it especially so in times of war and other national and international crisis. But it was messy and chaotic for Jesus and apostles then, and it is messy for us now. But we need not be anxious or discouraged, for God is in charge and promises to continue engaging this world, never to forsake it, until we all live together in Holy Kinship in God's peaceable kingdom, and take a stroll together, in the evening breeze. Amen.