

***Between Two Trees***  
**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-9**  
**Sermon by Mark Schloneger**  
**June 16, 2019**

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:15-17, NRSV)*

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

*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?"  
(Genesis 3:1-9, NRSV)*

When I was very young,  
my family lived in a tall, yellow house in rural Ohio.  
It seemed like our backyard was carved out from the acres of fields that my uncle farmed.  
I remember our backyard as an endless meadow of green grass,  
where I played baseball, caught butterflies, escaped bees, and chased down frisbees, barefoot,  
with my neighbor Brent and my cousins Brad and Wendy.

At the edge of our property,  
in between a field and our lawn,  
there was a wild space, untouched by either plow or mower.  
It was where the tall weeds grew, untamed and unruly, tangled up with each other.

When I was very young, before our family moved away,  
my parents' punishment of choice was to send their disobedient children

to this wild space to cut down thistles.  
This was for felonies, not misdemeanors –  
for perjury, for egregious acts of disorderly conduct, for unrepentant defamation, for rioting.  
I remember shamefully doing battle with those pricking and poking monsters looming on the  
perimeter.

At the time, I'm sure my parents didn't think too deeply about the meaning  
behind their thistle patch punishment.  
They just wanted their out-of-control child out of the house and burning some energy.  
But, as I've grown older, I've thought more about it.  
And I find it hard to imagine a better way  
for a parent to teach their child about sin, about evil, about our participation in it.

Working in the thistles forced me to face in a tangible way what we all would rather avoid –  
the wild spaces around us and within us,  
those places that grow untamed, untouched, looming to hurt others and ourselves.  
We do our best to ignore them, to minimize them, to control them,  
to protect ourselves from them.  
We convince ourselves that we got it handled.  
After all, we are Mennonites.  
We are among the enlightened.  
We are a peace church.  
We are concerned about climate change.  
We drink fair trade coffee.  
We have solar panels on our roof,  
We have a welcome statement on our website.  
When it comes to politics, to theology, to justice,  
we check all the boxes, baby,  
we think all the right thoughts.  
Yet there they are,  
the thistles on the edge of the property, waiting, growing, looming.

Where do they come from? Who put them there?  
The problem of evil and our participation in it –  
those are the thistles that we'd rather ignore, to minimize, to put off for another day.  
But Genesis refuses to let us do that.

Genesis, chapter 1.  
In the beginning, the earth was formless and empty,  
darkness was over the surface of the deep.  
In the midst of this darkness, emptiness, and chaos,  
God brings wholeness, order, stability, fruitfulness, blessing and purpose.  
God looked over all that he had created and saw that it was good. It was very good.

Genesis, chapter 1.

Then, we turned to Genesis, chapter 2,  
and we find that human beings and the rest of God's creation  
are not only intimately connected with God as their Creator,  
they are intimately connected with each other.

The Garden of Eden is the Bible's image of shalom.  
Shalom is being wholly and fully and completely at peace in all relationships.  
For human beings, this means being at peace with God,  
at peace with each other, at peace with ourselves, at peace with creation.  
Shalom.

And so when we ask about the origin of evil, of sin.  
Genesis 1 and 2 make this clear: it didn't come from God.  
It wasn't embedded in the DNA of creation itself.  
And so where does it come from? Who put it there?  
Why are there thistle seeds mixed into the garden soil?

That's why we turn to Genesis, chapter 3.  
We think we know this story.  
The serpent is Satan, we believe.  
The serpent is evil, we think.  
It's Satan that came into the garden and wrecked God's good creation.  
And, to be sure, there are places in the Bible that speak of Satan as a tempter.

But look closely. Genesis doesn't say those things.  
Verse 1 says only that the serpent was more crafty or shrewd than the other animals.  
Like the other animals, the serpent is a creature that God created.  
When it comes to the problem of sin,  
it seems to me that our focus on the serpent is simply another way for us human beings  
to deflect attention from ourselves.

In Genesis, chapter 3, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the source of temptation,  
the serpent merely facilitates the options the tree presents.

At the heart of Adam and Eve's temptation was one of trust.  
Did the God who created the universe,  
the God who flung the stars in the sky,  
who lifted up the mountains and pushed down the valleys,  
the God who filled the garden with trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food,  
was this God depriving them of something?

When they looked at the one thing that God had withheld from them,  
they were tempted to believe that God had not spoken the full truth,

that God had held something back to hold humans back,  
that God could not be trusted with their well-being.

*“You will not die,” said the serpent,  
“for God knows that when you eat of the fruit your eyes will be opened  
and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* (Genesis 3:4-5)

And so, when given the choice between actively exercising their own will or trusting God,  
they grabbed their future for themselves.

They held their destiny in their own hands.

They would take their own fruit,  
and they will eat what they take.

This is how the Bible explains our loss of innocence, our rebellion,  
our separation from God and from each other.

The Didache, one of the oldest Christian documents, begins like this:

“There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death,  
and there is a great difference between the two Ways.”

We can choose to trust God, or we can choose to trust ourselves.

There are consequences, of course.

The Shalom of God is disturbed.

The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened to their own inadequacies,  
their own vulnerabilities.

They hid their nakedness from each other and from God.

They hid their sin. They hid from God.

“Where are you?” God asked.

Where are you?

Where are you?

When God questioned them if he had eaten the forbidden fruit,  
they deflected the blame from themselves.

Adam even subtly blamed God: “The woman you put here with me, gave it to me, and I ate it.  
Eve blamed the serpent: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

You know, they did the same things we do.

We cover up. We blame others. Anything, to keep attention away from ourselves.

Because of sin, every aspect of human life is affected: marriage and sexuality, birth and death,  
work and food. Because of sin, there is humiliation, domination, subordination, suffering and  
struggle. We must remember that all of these things are the result of sin – they were not the  
way that God had created things to be.

Yet it’s important to remember that God did not abandon Adam and Eve.

There is grace in this text even as they suffered the consequences.  
For those of you who think that the God portrayed in the Old Testament is hard and angry,  
read Genesis 3 again.

God goes out looking for those who are hidden and ashamed, naked and afraid,  
and then, verse 21: “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed  
them.”  
And then he sent them from the garden so they would not spend eat from the Tree of Life and  
spend eternity in a fallen, sinful state.

You know, I don't think it's an accident that Jesus winds up in a garden, alone,  
on the night of his arrest.  
The way the Bible tells it, all of history seems to come full circle between two gardens,  
the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane.  
In the garden, Jesus faced the same temptations presenting the same choices offering the same  
fates to Adam and Eve before him.  
Would he exercise his own will to grasp his own future?  
Or would he trust God to provide for his future?

Not my will, but yours, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. When our will and God's  
will align, God's kingdom comes through Christ, on earth as it is heaven.

The body of Christ is where the problem of evil is not ignored, minimized or given lip  
service. No, the wounds on the hands and the feet of Jesus bear witness to its reality.

The body of Christ is God's alternative to war, God's alternative to oppression, God's alternative  
to abuse, God's alternative to the mistaken belief that we can eradicate evil by the force of our  
will, the strength of our resolve, and the exercise of our power.

The body of Christ bears the mark of suffering that is redemptive, that restores people to their  
proper place, that gathers men and women and children of all races and all nations to the same  
table with the bread and the cup shared in remembrance of Jesus.

The body of Christ is the place to bring the thistles that we ignore, hack at, or try to control, for  
it is the body of Christ that provides the answer for our sin, offering forgiveness and  
reconciliation to a world desperate for answers.

We say these things knowing that God's work in the church is not complete.  
Yesterday, in preparation for this sermon, I went out to the edge of Berkeley's property, in the  
rain, looking for thistles. It would be the perfect metaphor, I thought.  
But when I got there, I encountered something worse.  
Mosquitos. So many mosquitos that I literally ran away.

But the point remains.

We are not perfect people.  
The message of grace and peace in Jesus' name is good news for us, too.  
There are thistles on the edge of our property,  
there are armies of mosquitos in our midst,  
We acknowledge our sin,  
but, in Jesus' name, we turn from the forbidden fruit,  
and toward the tree of life in Revelation 22.

We are forgiven people who hear the voice of Jesus through the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 55:

*Listen carefully to me: eat what is good,  
delight yourselves in rich food,  
and your soul will delight t in the richest of fare.  
Incline your ear and come to me;  
listen, so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.  
. . . Let the wicked forsake their ways,  
and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the LORD,  
that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.;  
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.  
(Isaiah 55:2b-3, 7, 13).*