

Genesis 2:18-24 and 3: 1-17; 21
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
Sunday, October 13, 2024

Reframing Eve

Imagine you got two tickets to see Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony perform a masterpiece. You invite a friend. When the music begins in all its majesty your friend leans over, pointing to the string section and says, “they are down there dragging animal hair over cat gut and making sound.”

Nobody does that. That’s the language of logic. That’s car manual language. It is the language an astronaut needs in calculating propulsion and trajectory to get to space.

The Bible, not a car manual, opens with a poem, using what scholars call mythos language. This is the language of profound experience, like when an astronaut gazes at Earth from space and weeps, or when a symphony moves you to tears without knowing why.

That is the literature of Genesis, especially these poems and stories early on. Much more to say about this, but I needed to give that context.

Today, we start a new sermon series, "The 10%," highlighting the fact that women make up 10% of the characters in the Hebrew Scriptures. Over the next month or so, we'll explore some of these stories, beginning with Eve.

Eve has endured harsh criticism, but not from God — primarily from men in the church. This story has been weaponized against women for centuries. Tertullian called women “the gateway to the devil,” and Augustine claimed they aren’t made in God’s image. Church fathers and reformers alike have consistently proclaimed male superiority.

Now here’s how this story is usually told:

Adam and Eve were perfect, fresh creations — super humans — placed in a clothing-optional garden where they could eat anything except from one tree. God tested their obedience with a command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, after Eve conversed with a talking snake, she disobeyed, losing their perfection and that of all humanity since.

Now, due to Eve's choice, humanity is cursed by what has become known as original sin — almost like a sexually transmitted disease. Thanks a lot, Eve!

The messages heard by women coming out of this abysmal theology have been so harmful. I'll mention a few and hopefully dispel some nonsense:

Message 1: Woman is created for the sake of man: a helpmate to cure his loneliness (2:18-23).

False: The term "helpmate" reflects sexist translation choices to keep women in their place. The Hebrew word *Ezer* means "companion." In fact, *Ezer* is often used in Hebrew scriptures to describe God as the superior who creates and saves Israel.

Message 2: Woman tempted man to disobey and thus she is responsible for sin in the world (3:6); she is untrustworthy, gullible, and simpleminded.

False: The text states, "she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate." There's no mention of temptation or beguilement, and Adam's confession does not accuse Eve of tempting him. In fact, there's no reference to sin, the fall, Satan, or even an apple.

Message 3: Woman's desire for man (3:16) is God's way of keeping her faithful and submissive to her husband. God gives man the right to rule over woman (3:16)

False: As Womanist Bible Scholar Wil Gafney points out, The Hebrew preposition's primary meaning is "in" or "with" not OVER. "He shall rule with you". Sexist translation committees strike again. And, even if you grant "over", that text says the man "will" do this, not "should".

So, how might we listen to Eve in this story?

And yes, you are right to wonder: Who do you think you are, speaking like you understand the experience of women!? True. Not optimal. I'll add female voices to this. So, based on the text, and wishing we could hear directly from Eve, here's what she might say:

1 - I was Equal. God made us equal. God never instructed me to submit. Equality is the design; subordination is the flaw.

2- I was Curious. In my quest for knowledge, I was courageous enough to act on my curiosity. To quote Nadia Bolz-Weber, "*What if we understood Eve not as the original sinner, but as the original woman? What if instead of being ashamed, we were inspired by her courage to seek knowledge?*" My journey is your own journey — full of choices, mistakes, and the grace that holds us in our humanity.

3 - I was Scapegoated. He immediately blamed me for everything. A pattern I see that has continued. “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree”. He was standing there the whole time. He heard everything I talked about with the serpent and yet said nothing. Neither God nor myself tempted the man, and yet he implicates both of us in his guilt.

4 - I was loved. By God. Yes, things were different after that day, but that difference didn't mean God stopped loving us or that humanity became inherently evil. God came looking for us. Our humanity is not defined by our mistakes. There's no message from heaven saying, “I can't be with you anymore because of your sin.” Instead, God's love for us remained unchanged.

Friends, thank you for giving me the chance to say what Eve might say.

A few applications for us:

Patriarchy has plagued the church for 2,000 years and continues today, with messages of inferiority still present, even in so-called progressive churches. I recall a quote by Mary Daly, an early feminist theologian: “If God is male, male is God.” Which is why we need to always work to root out patriarchal language in worship. Today, we celebrate the women in our church who have persisted in making their voices heard and championed equality in the church, workplace, and at the ballot (see today's Christian Education offering). Equality is the design; subordination is the flaw.

If you have lived life long enough, you have been scapegoated as well. As was Jesus. I want you to know God sees you today just as God saw Eve. I am reminded of a Frederick Buchner quote from his book “Telling Secrets”:

“Life batters and shapes us in all sorts of ways before it's done, but those original selves which we were born with and which I believe we continue in some measure to be — no matter what — are selves which still echo with the holiness of their origin. This original self is the most essential part of who we are and is buried deep in all of us as a source of wisdom and strength and healing which we can draw upon or, with our terrible freedom, not draw upon as we choose.”

You are loved. This story reminds us of our inherent blessedness. We often believe the lie that we are inherently bad and that God seeks to punish us. Shame leads to hiding, yet it is God who comes searching for us in our shame. Lisa Sharon Harper reminds us that

“Shame whispers lies into our souls about who we are in our spirits. It immobilizes us with fear of exposure. It causes us to retreat further into ourselves or strike out against the perceived accusers. In the end, we remain unknown and disconnected.”

God covered them with animal skins to ease their shame — a commitment He extends to us as well. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, “we are robed in God’s righteousness.”

So I’d like for you to listen in two ways.

Listen to the voices of those who have been scapegoated, marginalized, and blamed for problems. This is the work of the evil one, perpetuated today by politicians who villainize entire populations to garner votes through fear and division. While we can’t change them, we can change ourselves and prioritize the voices of people like Eve, who have much to teach us.

Listen today to the voice of God asking, “Where are you?” inviting you to come home and be embraced by His love. No more hiding, no more shame — just love. As we receive this healing love, we can increasingly become the community of equity, mutuality, and healing that God calls us to be. Amen.