

Proper 5B: Genesis 3:1-21
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Sinning like a Christian

According to the 20th-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the doctrine of original sin is “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.” The evidence of ingrained sinfulness, he thought, is apparent everywhere—in acts of violence, in hatred of one group by another, in the mistreatment of children and the vulnerable, in the greed built into economic systems. Even human beings’ greatest accomplishments, Niebuhr argued, are inevitably tainted by sins of pride and self-interest. It’s not just that we commit sinful acts but that we are *by nature* sinful.

Yet if the church’s teaching on original sin seems obvious to some, it is a strange claim to many modern ears, and is confusing to many. The stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard imagines a man confessing, “Father, bless me for I did an original sin. . . . I poked a badger with a spoon”—to which a priest replies, “I’ve never heard of that one before!”

The doctrine of original sin refers, of course, not to the *novelty* of a sin but to its *first instance* and the consequences that issue from it. Our primordial ancestors disobeyed God, and forfeited their place in paradise, bequeathing to all subsequent generations an ingrained bent towards immorality. And that is why the world is the way it is, says Christianity.

Now, most people would surely agree that there is something quite obviously wrong with the world, that the world is not the way it should be. But Niebuhr was wrong that this constitutes clear and undeniable proof of the Christian doctrine of original sin. People today are more likely to ascribe misbehavior to mental illness or to an unhealthy childhood or to social repression, than to an inherited moral weakness.

Other religions, too, have their explanations for why the world is the way it is. Buddhists, for example, believe that everything we see and hear and touch are not real, but rather illusions, changing forms of an underlying changeless reality. Suffering then comes when we become attached to these illusions, cling to them. By contrast, Hindus believe that our suffering in this life is the result of bad karma. We failed to live compassionately in our last life and so in our reincarnated life, we have to work off our misdeeds by suffering.

So, original sin is not an empirically verifiable reality, as Niebuhr claimed, which all honest people must recognize. It is in fact a *peculiarly Christian* notion; indeed it is a profession of Christian faith. It says that what’s wrong with the world is not psychological maladjustment or poor self-esteem or social marginalization or bad karma. Rather, the root of our problems is our broken relationship with God. All the world’s problems are due, directly or indirectly, to our being at odds with God. Name a major issue today or even a minor one—terrorism, political corruption, environmental destruction, drug abuse, racism, theft, domestic abuse—they can all be traced back to the fact that we are not in a right relationship with God.

We today didn't cause all these problems, of course, any more than we created sin. It all began, we understand, a long time ago, beyond the mists of time, with the first humans, Adam and Eve. Now, whether Adam and Eve were actual historical persons or just mythological characters, there's no telling. I'm inclined to believe that they were real people, if only because it had to start with someone—if not with “Adam and Eve,” then with some other people. And the story of Adam and Eve makes as much sense historically as any other. More to the point, though, the story it tells is one that most of us, I think, can identify with.

Recall what happens in the story. Adam and Eve are living in the Garden, a paradise that God has set up for them. They have plenty of food to eat, they have a purpose—to tend and keep the garden. If they get bored, there are animals to hang out with, and God regularly shows up to spend time with them. But then one day, despite all that they've got going for them, all that God has provided them, Adam and Eve start to doubt God, to distrust God's goodness. A little voice in their heads—or, according to the story, from the serpent—starts whispering in their ear, “Does God *really* have your best interests at heart? Does God really care? Or is He holding out on you, keeping the best for Himself?”

This doubt turns into suspicion, which turns into distrust. And before they know it, Eve has seized the fruit, and she and Adam sink their teeth into it. They discover quickly that the serpent was telling the truth... or at least *part* of the truth. For upon biting into the fruit, their eyes *are* open. They know good and evil, right and wrong. And they recognize what they've just done was really wrong. They see that they're naked, exposed, and they're ashamed. They try to cover up, literally, they wrap themselves in fig leaves (which if you are at all familiar with fig trees, you know their leaves are rather scratchy). God comes, as He usually does, walking in the garden, but they hide from Him. When God catches up with them and He asks what happened, what do they do? They pass the blame. Adam blames Eve, “the woman you gave me made me do.” Eve blames the serpent: “the serpent tricked me,” and the serpent, having no one else to blame, keeps silent.

We don't have to get into what happens next, to the punishment, to know that something seriously wrong has happened, something they can't go back from. It's not just that they broke God's rules; what happened was, they broke faith with God, fell out with God, lost communion with Him. And that's the real problem.

You see, up to this point, everything that Adam and Eve needed had been provided for them. All that existed—from their home to their food to their animal companions—was given as a gift from God, and it all existed to make God known, to make their life communion with Him. But Adam and Eve sought to enjoy those gifts apart from the Giver. They wanted something God had not given them, that had not been blessed by God. Consequently, in eating it, they were having communion not with God, but with the fruit itself, a thing. The fruit thus became the image of the world loved for itself, and no longer as a gift from God, as something that is transparent to God's goodness, that reveals God and his love.

The legacy of Adam and Eve is not an inherited guilt for which we are responsible nor a kind of congenital moral defect. Rather, their legacy is a world where things aren't the way they are supposed to be, a world where it's easy to do evil and hard to do good, easy to hurt people and

hard to heal their wounds, easy to arouse suspicion and hard to build trust. Each of us is conditioned by our solidarity with the human race in its accumulated wrong-doing and wrong-thinking, and we've added our own deliberate acts of sin. Adam and Eve blazed a trail, cutting a rut in creation that we have had trouble getting out of ever since. They set the pattern for human existence, and we happily, or rather *unhappily*, have followed suit.

Indeed, this is, as I said, the story of not simply of Adam and Eve's fall, but of our own as well. We read this story of how Adam and Eve distrusted God, doubted God's goodness, and gave into temptation. Then they tried to hide from the consequences, to hide from God, blaming others, even God, only to find their relationships with Him, each other and the rest of creation ruptured... We read this story and we cannot help but see ourselves in it—our own vain attempts to cover up our misdeeds, our readiness to blame others, our alienation from others because we can't bear to face them, to face the truth. This is our story too, *our fall*.

A century ago, the London Times sent out an inquiry to authors who were famous at the time, asking them to offer their thoughts on "What's wrong with the world today?" The British journalist and Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton offered a succinct reply: "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton." Chesterton was of course not claiming to be the cause of all the world's misfortune, but rather that we are all implicated in what's wrong with the world.

For we have all sinned, all seen things we shouldn't see, done things we shouldn't have done, thought things we shouldn't have thought. It's no use blaming our parents—or our primordial parents, Adam and Eve—for the way we turned out. Our hands and faces are covered with fruit too.

So, then, are we to be resigned to despair? We've sinned, we're sinners by nature, and there's nothing that can be done about it? No, there is hope even here. There is a promise in the midst of the tragedy. Recall what God says to the serpent at the end of the story: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Serpent striking the offspring of Eve, and the offspring of Eve crushing the serpent's head... Any idea what this could refer to? Who God is talking about?

Here at the beginning of the Bible, right after humanity's fateful fall, we find the first hint of the Gospel, a 'proto-Gospel,' if you will. For more than simply explaining why humans and snakes don't get along, God's pronouncement points forward to the conflict between Christ, the offspring of Eve, and Satan, pictured in Revelation as the Great Serpent. As God predicted, Satan will strike his heel, will kill Jesus, but Jesus will crush his head, that is, will be victorious over Satan and the demonic powers.

The Gospel lesson today speaks to this. It shows how, according to Mark, the mission of Jesus is to "bind the strong man," that is, to conquer the Devil and to put an end to the reign of the forces of darkness that seek to destroy God's good creation. This is the core of Jesus' mission, according to Mark, to conquer Satan, to crush the serpent. Indeed, we can't really understand the story of the Fall without knowing how Jesus is God's answer to the Fall, come to fix the world and restore us to communion with God.

To be sure, the story of the Fall is part of our story, an important part. Without it we would be missing a key piece of why things are the way they are, why we are the way we are. But it is only part of the story, and not the defining part. We're only three chapters into the Bible, there are many more chapters that come after it. chapters which witness to the fact that though we have fallen, and continue to fall, to sin, God refuses to leave us there. God calls out for us, seeks us out, as he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden, wanting to bring us back home to Him, to heal us and heal the world, to restore a true and right relationship with Him, to get us back on track with the way the world was supposed to be at the beginning. And so we say, Thanks be to God, for though we've fallen, through Christ, we can get back up again. Amen.