MESSAGE: The most misunderstood story in the bible
Adam and Eve, Part 1 of 2

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World Communion Sunday
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TEXT: Genesis 3

MEDITATION: 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. (Genesis 3:6)

NOTE: The interpretation of this story and many thoughts in this message come from Harold S. Kushner's How Good Do We Have to Be?

The story of Adam and Eve may be the most misunderstood story in the bible.
And if you get that wrong,
you may get wrong what you think God expects of you.

Let's review the story.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. That’s how the book begins.

In the second chapter of Genesis,

God formed man from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;
and the man became a living being.

God created man. By the way, for the first three chapters, he is just known as “the man.” It’s not until the 4th chapter that we find “the man” is now called “Adam.” Now, Genesis was not written in English, but in Hebrew. The Hebrew word for “dust” is “adamah” which is appropriate, since the man was formed from the dust of the ground.

The bible makes plays on words that we can’t catch in English. For example, if you wanted to say that God created mankind... or humankind... that is, if you wanted to say that God made MAN... or HUMANS... you would say God created ha-a’dam. The ha is the definite article. The aDAM is the word for humankind... or... Adam!
So in the second chapter of Genesis, where it says God formed man... the word for man is aDAM... which in that instance is NOT the proper name BUT RATHER the word for humans.

For this new man, God created a beautiful garden. God told the man he could eat anything he wanted... EXCEPT...

"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."

Then... God made woman, and woman and man were both naked and were not ashamed and enjoyed the good life in the garden.

Now here’s where the music throbs and trouble enters the picture:

Enter the talking snake... the SERPENT... who asks the woman what she’s allowed to eat. She explains the rules... and the one big exception.

“NAH, says the talking serpent. You’re not going to die! Don’t worry about that!”

In fact, adds the serpent... you eat this forbidden fruit and you’ll actually BECOME LIKE GOD. It’ll open your eyes. Then, you’ll know good and evil. Get a life here, Eve. Don’t bury your head in the sand. Get real: there is good and bad out there and you ought to know about it.

That makes sense, thinks Eve, so she takes a bite of the one thing she’s been told not to bite, and it’s GOOD!

Then she looks around and calls “Oh Aaaddaaam!”

He took one bite and suddenly, both the man and this woman look down and see that... hmmm... they don’t have any clothes on!

Then, the bible says they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Now the music pounds as they hear the sound of the Lord walking in the garden. Here come da judge. They hide. The Lord calls...

“Yo, Adam... man, where are you?”

Hee Hee... I was hiding, Lord. I didn’t have any clothes on and I was afraid, so I hid.

Huuum. Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I
commanded you not to eat?

The man said, well, yeah, but... THAT WOMAN whom you gave to be with me:

THAT WOMAN... SHE gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.
She made me do it.

Blame the woman!

For a moment we wonder if he's going to get away with it...

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."

Blame the talking snake.

The Lord doesn't buy it. He dishes out instant punishment.

1. To the snake, who apparently had legs, the Lord removed his legs and made him crawl on his belly and eat dirt for the rest of his life.

2. To the woman, the Lord ruled I will put enmity between you and ... your offspring. Enmity means hostility. Strife. Antagonism. You see, mothers, this is why your teenagers have a hard time getting along with you. It's because of Eve. That's not all the woman got: "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

3. To the man, the Lord said "No more romping around naked in the garden for you. It's out to the labor market you go. Into the fields... which the Lord cursed with thorns and thistles. The man had to go to work, sweating it out from sunup to sundown. Vacation is OVER!

Then... God booted both the man and the woman out of the Garden of Eden.

What's wrong with this story?

There's something not right about this story!

At least, there's something very odd about our typical understanding of the story.

1. First of all, and this is the big thing, how can you believe in a God who punished people so severely for breaking one arbitrary rule? Isn't this harsh punishment for one small mistake? They made one blunder and God rejected them. What's he expect, that you should be perfect?

2. Second, if Adam and Eve had no knowledge of good and evil before they ate the forbidden fruit, how could they have been expected to know that it was wrong to disobey God? Is this story telling us that God made humans sinful and then
punishes them for that? God made you flawed and is holding you responsible for being imperfect?

3. Third, why did God create a tree that He didn’t want anyone to eat from? Was God setting them up to disobey so that He could punish them?

4. Fourth, why is the story told in such a way as to make it seem that it was all the woman’s fault?

Something’s not right about that... and when something seems so different from the God of love, compassion, and grace whom Jesus told about... it may be that we’re missing something.

You see,

IF the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is viewed as a story of disobedience and divine punishment... if that’s what he did to THEM... THEN you’d come to believe that God would punish YOU severely if you ever did anything wrong.

So much of the unhappiness that people feel burdened by... much of the guilt... stems from two related causes:

1. Either somewhere along the way, somebody – a parent, a teacher, a religious leader – gave them the message that they were not good enough, and they believed it. Or
2. They came to expect and need more from the people around them – their parents, children, husbands or wives – than those people could realistically deliver.

Lots of misery could be traced to the mistaken notion that we need to be perfect for people to love us and we forgo that love if we ever fall short of perfection or even if we make mistakes.

So we become ashamed of our imperfections... and wonder if we will be punished in some way for our imperfections... even one mistake... like Adam and Eve in eating the forbidden fruit. Could one mistake cause you to lose Paradise, get booted out of God’s arms, and maybe even sentenced to life at hard labor?

That doesn’t square with the God Jesus taught about. So let’s take a look to see if there might be another understanding to the story of Adam and Eve.

Kushner’s Interpretation

I find great inspiration in Harold Kushner’s interpretation of this story. Rabbi Kushner is is a prolific author and is probably best known for his book When Bad Things Happen to Good People.
Kushner says...

I don’t take the story of the Garden of Eden as a newspaper report of an actual event, though I know that some people do, describing the human race as beginning with two full-grown, Hebrew-speaking adults and a talking snake. But I do believe that the story of the Garden of Eden tells us something profoundly true about the emergence of the human race.

Kushner suggests that the story of the Garden of Eden is a tale -- not of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Outgrown, not of Original Sin but of the Birth of Conscience.

It is the coming of age of humankind.

Kushner explains:

The account of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a description of how the first human beings left the world of animal existence behind and entered the problematic world of being human. It is the biblical account of evolution, seeing the difference between humans and animals in moral rather than in anthropological terms.

ANIMALS never have to make moral decisions. When it comes to killing for food, mating, or protecting their young, animals are driven by instinct. HUMANS, on the other hand, having eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, find issues of supporting their families much more complicated.

When God told Adam not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, He gave not so much a prohibition but a WARNING, like the person telling a friend in line for a promotion, “You know, if you get that job, you’ll have more responsibility and less time with our family. You’ll have to make decisions that will hurt innocent people. Are you sure you want that?”

Might it be, asks Kushner, that God WANTED Adam and Eve to eat the fruit, though He knew it would make their lives painful and complicated and He winced at the pain they would be condemning themselves to, because God didn’t want to be the only One in the world who knew the difference between Good and Evil?

Animals, he says, can feel pain, but human beings, because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, can feel a dimension of pain that animals cannot. We can feel loss, dread, frustration, jealousy, betrayal, at levels animals will never know. It is part of the price we pay for our humanity, for our being able to feel love, joy, hope, achievement, faithfulness, and creativity.

And what about the punishments for eating the forbidden fruit? Consider those verses with fresh eyes, says Kushner, without the presumption that this is a story of misbehavior and punishment. Work, sexual intimacy, parenthood, a sense of
mortality, the knowledge of good and evil – aren’t those precisely the things that separate us from the animal kingdom? Those are the sources of creativity, the things that make us human.

Kushner summarizes: I am suggesting that the story of the Garden of Eden is NOT an account of people being punished for having made one mistake, of losing Paradise because they were not perfect. It is the story of the first human beings GRADUATING, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being human and knowing that there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil.

They enter a world where they will inevitably make many mistakes, NOT because they are weak or bad but because the choices they confront will be such difficult ones. But the satisfactions will be equally great. While animals can only be useful and obedient, human beings CAN BE GOOD.

The story of the Garden of Eden is not a story of the Fall of Man, but of the Emergence of Humankind.

Oh, and the woman? She is not the villain, says Kushner, but the heroine of the story, leading her husband into the brave new world of moral demands and moral decisions. She is boldly crossing the boundary into the unknown, venturing to discover what lies beyond the limits of animal existence, and reaching back to bring Adam after her. Eve, rather than imposing Sin and Death on her descendants, gives us humanity, with all of its pain and all of its richness. Like Pandora, the donor of “all gifts,” Eve has given her descendants more than existence: SHE HAS GIVEN US LIFE!

And that is why the man, a’DAM, named her Eve: the Source of Life.

Conclusion

So... let’s take a look at what THIS understanding of the Garden of Eden might mean for you... because you might think God expects you not to make any mistakes or to ever disobey... to be perfect... you might come to expect yourself to be perfect, you might expect your closest relationships to be perfect, and you might be laboring under years of the burden that someone else expected you to be perfect... and then... there is that verse in the Sermon on the Mount that says... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

So how good to you have to be?

Let’s take a look... next week....

Amen.