

“The Big Listen: In the Garden” (fn.:GENESIS 3 1-13.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Genesis 3:1-13

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**Genesis 3:1-13** *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?’”<sup>2</sup> The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;<sup>3</sup> 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.’”<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die;<sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.*

<sup>8</sup> *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.* <sup>9</sup> *But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”* <sup>10</sup> *He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”* <sup>11</sup> *He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”* <sup>12</sup> *The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”* <sup>13</sup> *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 great theologian Karl Barth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was once asked by a student: “Do you believe the serpent could really talk in the Garden of Eden?” Barth’s response was something like this: “What is important is not whether the serpent could talk. What is important is what the serpent said!” In other words, asking the literal question is the wrong question.

Asking the wrong question—it is like the couple who were set to wallpaper their bedroom. A friend had just wall-papered their bedroom...much the same size. So the couple said to the friend: “How many rolls did you buy?” Answer: 10. So the couple bought 10 specialty rolls, non-refundable. But the project only took 5 rolls. They said to their friend: “It only took five rolls!” The friend said: “I had the same experience—bought 10, used 5!” Consider the initial question the couple asked: “How many rolls did you buy?” To which they received an accurate answer. Wrong question! The right question was “How many rolls did you use?”

Likewise, we could ask of Scripture today, “What was the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze?” Wrong question! The more vital question is this: “What did the Lord say?” Now we are getting somewhere! Indeed, what did the serpent say, what did the man and woman say, and what did the Lord say...those are the right questions.

So consider the serpent. Let’s be clear that there is nothing said here in the story that identifies this snake with Satan, the devil, Lucifer or the like...that’s a later interpretation. In fact, there is no explanation of why the serpent is in the Garden in the first place. The serpent is just part of the story.

But the serpent is a theologian...perhaps the first theologian. How do we know that? The serpent does not talk to God but about God. That’s doing “theology”—talking about God. The serpent speaks about what God has said and done. And the serpent’s question to the woman invites the

woman to join in theological talk, to talk about God...which she does—the woman joins in theological talk, “talk about God.” From a grammatical point of view, the difference is between the third person and the second person. The serpent stays only in the third person. And by doing so, the conversation turns God into an “object” to be discussed.

Let me illustrate: I can talk about my wife Sheri...but that is very different from talking to her. When I talk TO someone, there is much to go on, but there is also always mystery. When I talk to you, I cannot cut you open and see into your consciousness. I can only respond to what is given—the words, the body cues, the time you give me. Oh, I can make up a story about what you are thinking, what you are feeling, what drives you...but in the end, I cannot break through the mystery of “you.”

The serpent moves only in the third person—God is an object to discuss, dissect, and analyze. And when God is an object, what has been given becomes a limit. Before the serpent speaks, the Garden is truly Paradise. Not eating from one tree among the abundance of all the other trees is no burden, no real limit on freedom. It was just a given that one does not eat from that one tree. But what the serpent introduces is a limit...a limit that creates anxiety about what one lacks. And, according to the serpent, what one lacks is being God...being like God! And, so says the serpent, there is a way to address the uncertainty of not being God. All you have to do is bite the apple. And we bite the apple every time!

Then the story shifts—shifts from talking about God and about what is lacking—to the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the evening. Again, how the man and the woman heard is the wrong question. That they heard is important...and what they heard was God asking: “Where are you?”

Our usual talk about God would make such a question foolish. God is all-power, all-knowing, all-present. God wouldn't ask a question like that. God would already know the answer...why the question? And yet God says: “Where are you?” Answer: “We are hiding.”

This story from Genesis is not about “what really happened” but rather about who we are. We call this first man “Adam,” but the word “adam” appears hundreds of times more in the Old Testament. It is simply word “man.” So, the story is about a man called “Man.” And Eve is the Hebrew equivalent of “Mother”—there is a woman called “Mother.” This story is about who we are...about our very humanity. Adam and Eve, the first man and first woman, don't want to face the question: “Where are you?” We see our own vulnerability and weakness and we hide...and we are afraid...and fear controls us.

Let me illustrate with a personal story that I shared with my daughter Amy last night (one I had never told her as I was reflecting on how much she cares for her children, my grandchildren). Back in the summer of 2004, I was in Acapulco, Mexico, with my daughter Amy and husband-to-be, Michael. We went to the beach on an overcast day. The surf was frightening. The large waves did not break out in the water but rather slammed right against the shore. I am a strong swimmer; I have played in the ocean surf as long as I can remember, but I found myself being slammed against the beach by these waves. I was terrified. Daughter Amy was in the same surf and was being slammed down—she was frightened, terrified as I was. She cried out: “Dad, help me!” And I couldn't help her—my panic was as extreme as hers. All I could think about was “Am I going to

live?” And in the midst, my daughter was calling to me: “Dad, help me!” I can still hear that plaintive cry. Both of us clearly survived...but the experience continues to haunt me.

I still tremble at my vulnerability and weakness. Dads are stronger than that; Dads are more capable than that. Dads don't let the children be put in such a risky situations. Dads respond to the calls of help of their children. But fear and panic took over.

What happens in the garden is that fear takes over. This first man and first woman hear God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening. And they hide...they are afraid. And God says “Where are you?” What they knew, we also know: we know our lack; we know our falling short; we know our nakedness. Better to talk about God than have to talk to God. Better to hide...but we get found out. God keeps asking: “Where are you?”

My Old Testament professor at seminary used to say that the first question of God in the Bible is this: “Where are you?” And the second question of God in the Bible is the following: “Where's your brother?” The next story in Genesis is about how Adam and Eve have two sons, Cain and Abel. And son Cain murders his brother Abel. Cain—who out of sibling rivalry, out of anger, out of frustration, out of jealousy, out of his sense of “lack”—kills his own brother. And, God—the all-knowing God—asks: “Where's your brother?” As if God did not know! Again, when we talk about God we say “God knows everything.” And yet here God asks the question: “Where's your brother?” Perhaps it is that we don't face that question any better than “Where are you?” My Old Testament professor concluded in this way: The first two God-questions of the Bible are “Where are you?” and “Where's your sibling?” Everything else in the Bible is just commentary!

God keep asking us: “Where are you?” And where's your brother...where's your sister? We are defined in the presence of God, and we are defined in the presence of every human being who bears the likeness of God. And that's everyone here!

God still walks into the midst of the lives of the children of Adam and Eve. And God keeps whispering...keeps shouting: “Where are you?” And we can hide in fear...and we can hide by pointing the finger at someone else—It's is the snake's fault; it is the man's fault; it is the woman's fault...and we can even suggest that it is God's fault. But we hide...mostly out of fear and panic...but sometimes we hide right out in the open by choice.

One of the great poems of the Victorian era addresses this choice to hide...a poem that no longer works as well on modern ears, entitled “The Hound of Heaven.” The thesis is God's pursuit of us is like a hound after the fox! The poem, by Francis Thompson, spells out the ways we choose to hide...we flee...we run...we go the opposite way than to be found. The opening part of the poem still works:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him....

The poem traces out how God keeps seeking us...even in our hiding.

Sometimes this hiding is not so deliberate, not so purposeful, but is just a matter of indifference. Yes, we hide by simply refusing to go along with awareness, we choose not to know. There is an old rabbinic story told of Rabbi Baruch whose grandson Yechiel came crying to him one day. It seems Yechiel had been playing hide-and-seek with friends, but when Yechiel managed to find a very clever hiding place, his impatient friends simply abandoned him and went home. Yechiel felt abandoned by his friends. As his grandson told him what happened—that he hid but no one came to find him, Rabbi Baruch's eyes too filled with tears, "God says the same thing, my child: 'I hide, but no one wants to seek Me!'" God says: "I hide...are you looking for me?" In answer to God's "Where are you?" maybe we are the ones who just go off to play somewhere else.

"Where are you?" God still asks that question. Each Sunday we gather for worship to say...to say aloud: "Here I am, Lord...here I am." For the good news is that God is also saying: All-ly, all-ly in-free!