

“Wilderness Times”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, March 1, 2020

Genesis 2 and 3, Matthew 4

Welcome to Lent, with its wilderness times. Jesus will go into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights and be tempted by the devil. Adam and Eve, who have lived and thrived in their beautiful Garden of Eden, will discover that temptation lies at the center of it.

The story of Adam and Eve and the serpent is one of the first stories in our Bible and one that is very well known. It's been explained also as the story of the Fall of Man and original sin, and primarily identified by Eve's temptation by the snake to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, followed by the expulsion from the Garden into a life of hardship and death.

An online source wrote, in the 4th century, church father “Augustine treated the story of Adam and Eve as the primal narrative of the origin of all corruption and chaos in the created order ... Because Eve was less rational than Adam, her will was more susceptible to the wiles of the serpent.”¹

American Old Testament biblical scholar, Alice Ogden Bellis, observes how Eve is habitually presented in an inferior light: “The Apostle Paul writes in 1Timothy 2:13-14, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” Bellis continues, “In the centuries following Jesus’ life, this view of Eve as the source of sin showed up frequently in religious literature. Eve was often associated with sin and sexuality, viewed in a negative light. Thus women were thought to be in need of dominance by stronger, more virtuous men ... The emphasis on woman’s sin and inferiority found in religious texts also made its way into art and literature. The most important example is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.² Here is some of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, written in 1667 – where Adam and Eve consider the forbidden fruit.

Here is Eve speaking:

On my experience, Adam, freely taste,
and fear of death deliver to the winds.
So saying, she embraced him, and for joy
tenderly wept; ...

In recompence from the bough
she gave him of that fair enticing fruit
with liberal hand: he scrupled not to eat,
against his better knowledge; not deceived,
but fondly overcome with female charm.

¹ <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/augustine-and-eve>

² Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes, Alice Ogden Bellis, 38.

Thus it shall befall him,
who, to worth in women overtrusting,
lets her will rule: ...

O! why did God,
creator wise, that peopled highest Heaven
with Spirits masculine, create at last
this novelty on earth, this fair defect
of nature, and not fill the world at once
with Men, as Angels, without feminine;

Or find some other way to generate
Mankind? This mischief had not been befallen,
And more that shall befall; innumerable
disturbances on earth through female snares,
and strait conjunction with this sex:

Not many years later, the Matthew Henry Bible Commentary of 1708 will squarely put the blame on Eve for mankind's predicament: "Satan tempted Eve, that by her he might tempt Adam. It is his policy to send temptations by hands we do not suspect, and by those that have most influence upon us ... It was Eve's weakness to enter into this talk with the serpent."³

One of the earliest feminist biblical scholars from the 1800's, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wrote this in her 1895 publication, *The Woman's Bible*, in which she puts the blame squarely on Adam: 'Out of this allegory grows the doctrines of original sin, the fall of man, and woman the author of all our woes.'⁴ "The command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of Knowledge was given to the man alone *before* the woman was formed: Genesis 2:17....

Verse 17: And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you will die.

Verse 18: Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a partner."

Having had the command from God himself he interposes no word of warning or remonstrance, but takes the fruit from the hand of his wife without a protest. It takes six verses to describe the "fall" of woman, the fall of man is contemptuously dismissed in a line and a half."⁵

So, what has this to do with today? So very much. For the deeply ingrained belief, as sustained within the church for centuries, is that women are inferior and are dependent on men to control their weaknesses; that women are temptresses; that they should know better.

³ <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=mhc&b=1&c=3>

⁴ *The Woman's Bible*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 15.

⁵ *Woman's Bible*, 17-18.

Robyn Doolittle is a reporter who has done work for Canada's national newspapers. In her 2019 book, 'Had it Coming', she includes an email response she received in 2017 when covering a rape trial of a university student, when a grandmother wrote, "I know from [my granddaughters] how much alcohol is consumed by their female peers, much more than other generations ... should the victims not be held responsible for putting themselves at risk through their irresponsible behaviour?"⁶ And this mindset continues to dominate. It continues to have a voice in the very publicly reviewed sexual assault and rape cases over the last several years, spawning the #metoo movement.

I think of the Jian Ghomeshi trial in 2015, who was found not guilty on all counts of sexual assault. I think of the 2018 rape testimony by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh as part of the confirmation hearings for his appointment to the Supreme Court. Her testimony was dismissed. I think of Harvey Weinstein, recently found guilty of 2 of 5 rape charges. There was hope expressed in the Weinstein verdicts by the women who bravely went forward to testify that maybe now, maybe today, something is changing. Maybe women are beginning to be believed. But for far too long, women have not been believed, shrouded in the belief that 'they asked for it' because of their dress, because of their lack of sobriety, because of their lack of judgement. The residue of Eve as the temptress, Eve as the seductress sticks to them from centuries of invocation.

So much turmoil and anguish and sadness has happened at the foot of the tree of knowledge that stands in the middle of a mythical garden. And we continue to battle stereotypes and myths that colour judgement and perspectives in anything that deals with he said/she said sexual assault cases.

But there was another tree in that Garden of Eden. The tree of life.

Genesis 2:9 "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

And in Revelation 22:1-2, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal ... on either side of the river, is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

In the Anishinable Spiritual Center in Espanola, Ontario, is a Tree of Life painting, by Blake Debassige. The tree is the body of Christ crucified. Christ, crucified on the tree, is the tree of life, and we are invited to sit beneath its shade and rest. Elizabeth Poston wrote these words about that tree:

The tree of life my soul hath seen
Laden with fruit, and always green:
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ the apple tree

⁶ Had it Coming, Robyn Doolittle, 212.

For happiness I long have sought
And pleasure dearly I have bought:
I missed of all; but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the apple tree

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive
It keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the apple tree

May your journey this Lent bring you to a place under the shade of this tree of Life, as you wrestle and struggle and strive to understand what your time in the wilderness is teaching you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.