

The Great Tragedy

4th Weekend after Pentecost – June 11/12, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Genesis 3:1-13 (NRSV)

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

⁸They 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.⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”¹⁰ He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”¹¹ He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”¹² The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”¹³ 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.”

We all make excuses. There is nothing that humans are not capable of rationalizing away. Today, we return to the Garden, taking a closer look at the “oh-so-human” choices and excuses made by Adam and Eve.

We shouldn’t be surprised that we so often return to the opening chapters of Genesis. One of the great Old Testament scholars, Gerhard von Rad, once commented that it is impossible to “over-interpret” Genesis 1-3. He meant that every bit of it is packed with meaning and significance. I once heard a 12-part lecture series on Genesis. It took the professor six lectures to get out of the first three chapters! This emphasis on the opening chapters is more Christian than Jewish. This isn’t surprising when we remember that, for Christians, Jesus came to make right what went so terribly wrong in the garden.

And so today, we return to the story of Adam and Eve’s tragic choices and listen for something we might not have heard before.

The first sin

It is not very hard to see the first bad choice made by Adam and Eve. It gets most of the press. In their

The Truth about Sin

I remember leaving a St. Andrew worship service about six years ago at which I overheard a young woman say to her friend, “There was simply too much talk about sin today. That was such a downer.” Ok . . . those may not have been her exact words. I don’t think young people actually use the word “downer” anymore. But her point was clear to me.

Sin may be a “downer” but if Christians are anything, we are realists. Rose-colored glasses have no place in our pockets. Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about ourselves and our world. The problem when we begin to talk about sin is that it is commonly misunderstood.

We tend to think of sin only as the breaking of a rule, as if we might look back over our day and count the sins we committed. But this is not the best way to go about understanding sin.

Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we chase after false gods or dishonor our parents or covet our neighbor’s house or commit adultery, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God’s way. And the result was that God came to walk with them in the evening and Adam hid from God! *Separation.*

In the biblical worldview, Adam and Eve’s choice is still with us. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God.

Please join us this Monday night in Piro Hall at 6:45 as we talk more about the reality of sin, its meaning, and a few surprises.

desire to be like gods themselves, to be equal with the divine, they do the one thing that God asked them not to do – the one thing. And their relationship with God is torn apart. And even more astoundingly, all creation is burdened by their bad decision. In the words of Paul, from that day forward, all creation would groan awaiting its own redemption, its own renewal and transformation (see Romans 8:18-30). Adam and Eve’s choice had far-reaching consequences. It certainly reminds us that our own choices can touch lives and events in ways that we never imagined. But it is Adam and Eve’s next sin, their second sin, that we want to concentrate on today.¹

The devil made me do it

In my classes, it often takes students a little time to grasp the second sin, but once they do, the room is filled with knowing and guilty smiles. God asks Adam and Eve why they took a bite of the forbidden fruit. Well, the answer is so human, so typical – Adam quickly blames Eve and, by extension, God, for who came up with Eve in the first place (2:18). For her part, Eve points her finger at the snake. So far as Adam and Eve are concerned, they didn’t *really* do anything wrong. They aren’t *really* responsible. It is someone else’s fault. The devil made me do it!

Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Bible and it is foundational to all that follows. In it, we learn that there is a God who created everything and created humans in God’s image. We learn that God gave the humans a beautiful place to live and to work, a place in which their relationship with God could thrive. But we also learn that, in their desire to be like gods themselves, the humans tossed all this away, doing the one thing God had asked them not to do. Through this act of selfish defiance, the humans’ relationship with God was deeply mangled and, indeed, all of creation became misshapen and only a shadow of what God intended. All of this happens in the first three chapters of Genesis!

The rest of the Bible is the story of God’s efforts to make things right, to restore creation, and to bring humans back into a right relationship with their creator – our creator.

The story of Noah is really a story of “uncreation” and new creation, a fresh start. But this start goes wrong too. No sooner do the humans get off the ark than they begin building for themselves a tower that would reach to the heavens. Again, they would seek to be like gods. So God dashes the tower to the ground and scatters the people, even going so far as to burden them with a multitude of languages.

So . . . in the 12th chapter of Genesis, we learn that God undertook a new way forward, ever determined that his people would be restored to a right and loving relationship with God. We meet Abram, later called Abraham, the man God chooses to be the father of a people, God’s people, through whom God would put things right. As Genesis unfolds, we meet Abraham, his wife, Sarah, their sons, Isaac and Esau, and Isaac’s son, Jacob. Jacob, in turn, has twelve sons, from whom would come the twelve tribes of Israel. And, of course, the story of this restoration reaches its climax in Jesus Christ who, as Israel’s representative king, would do for Israel what the people were unable to do for themselves.

The writer of Genesis knows us so well . . . God knows us so well. We are giant excuse factories. Somebody else is to blame for everything “bad” that happens to us. Commentators often call America a society of victims. Nothing just happens anymore – it is always somebody else’s fault, never our own.

One of the tough theological questions is centered upon God’s rule over all of creation and our own freedom. How free are we? How much of our lives and actions does God control? The biblical view is that however we think of freedom, we are free enough to be justly held responsible for what we do, for the decisions we make. God created us to love, but we are free to not love. God desires us to be merciful, but we can be mean and uncaring if we choose.

The great tragedy

There is a larger stage on which the second sin is played out. A wise person (I wish I could remember who!) once remarked that the great tragedy of humankind is that we can find a reason for everything. To put it another way, there is no evil that humans can’t rationalize or excuse away. Auschwitz? Wounded Knee? Apartheid? They were all justified in the minds of the perpetrators. But as the remarkable story of South Africa has unfolded, we’ve seen the power of confession and repentance. The underlying premise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that the only way to mend relationships and build a lasting peace was to begin with honest confession and forgiveness – amnesty was granted to those who came forward admitting to human rights abuses. Who would have ever guessed that apartheid in South Africa would have been ended without a civil war?

By God’s grace, genuine confession and repentance is the only path toward reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust between ourselves and God and between one another.

¹We’ll be using Ellsworth Kalas’ *Old Testament Stories from the Backside* in this sermon series. All of Kalas’ “. . . from the backside” books are excellent and I highly recommend. In them, Kalas is always looking a less-than obvious way into a Bible story.

Daily Bible Readings

(the opening chapters of Genesis in the New Testament)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Romans 8:18-30 All creation groans awaiting its own liberation.</p>	<p>Day 2 Colossians 1:15-23 Through Jesus, all things were created. Through him, all creation is reconciled with God.</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Corinthians 4 Present weakness and resurrection life</p>	<p>Day 4 Romans 5:12-20 Death through Adam, life through Christ (The fact that this is a 2nd reading from Romans highlights how foundational Genesis 1-3 are for NT theology.)</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 12:7-12 We meet the serpent again (v. 9), who is defeated by the archangel Michael and cast down out of the heavens to the earth.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

St. Andrew Summer Lecture Series – begins tomorrow evening: Monday, June 13

Each summer, we offer a casual summer series. This year, we'll meet on the *second Monday* in June, July, and August. There is no sign-up required. Just come down to Piro Hall around 6:45 or so. We'll have refreshments and spend a little time getting to know one another. Scott Engle's lecture will start at 7pm.

We'll wrap up no later than 8:30. Our topics will be:

June 13: "The Surprising Truth about Sin"

July 11: "Amazing Grace"

August 8: "Being Right, Wrong, and Righteous"

June Book Recommendation

What's So Amazing About Grace, by Philip Yancey

Here it is in a nutshell: "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less." Grace is one of those words that we throw around a lot, but I wonder how much we really understand it. Yancey writes, "Grace is our last best word . . . it contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the sun." Like the other Yancey books I've recommended, I'm confident that you will both enjoy this book and get a lot out of it.

You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Why so many excuses? As is so often the case when I think about God, I find the parent-child metaphor to be enormously helpful here. Every parent and every child knows that kids are inclined to offer up excuses for their bad behavior, sometimes bordering on the absurd. We also know that admitting mistakes is essential to building trust between parent and child. This is hard lesson to learn for many parents when it comes to admitting their own mistakes to their children. But it is essential. We all make mistakes. We all do things that we know we shouldn't and fail to what we ought to do.

Acknowledgement and confession of these bad choices is key to rebuilding trust. You might share some stories from your own life about occasions when admitting a mistake or bad choice was exceedingly difficult. Why was it so hard? How did you find the strength to own up? Did you? You might also share stories of how important avoiding excuses was to rebuilding a damaged relationship.

Finally, you might spend some time discussing the two sins of Adam and Eve, pride (the desire to be like gods) and finger-pointing (making excuses). What does this say to us about the nature of sin?