

Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible

I. Uh-oh, I Think We Took A Wrong Turn

Genesis 3:1-12, 20-23 NRSV Now the serpent was more subtle 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'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 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. 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. 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. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was ashamed, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.".... The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. Then the LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"-- therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

AAA estimates that almost forty million Americans took to the roads last weekend for a Memorial Day vacation.¹ The New York Times estimates that in 2015 Americans will take a total of 871 million vacation trips by car, from one-day outings to multi-week excursions.² The "road trip" is a staple of American literature and movie-making, from the sad and grueling depression era film based on Steinbeck's novel "The Grapes of Wrath" to

¹<http://newsroom.aaa.com/2015/05/aaa-37-2-million-americans-kick-summer-memorial-day-getaway/>

²<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/travel/where-will-americans-travel-in-2015-.html>

the unlikely comedy successes of the Hangover series of movies, from the poignant story of Rainman to the rumbling roar of Max Max's Fury Road; from Dinah Shore singing in the 1950s "See the USA in your Chevrolet" to Thelma and Louise's much grimmer version of a road trip, from the late Charles Kuralt's lovely travelogues to Chevy Chase's "Vacations" series to Willie Nelson's crooning "On the Road Again." Americans do indeed love their road trips and so it seemed apt to me an apt title for this new summer sermon series. For the motif of "the journey" is one that can be found in most every book in the Bible, and, as with so many of the trips you and I have taken, those journeys can help illuminate important things about our lives and they can sometimes help us change our lives. The clarity of travel can help us see new things and understand in new ways. And even though the danger is that this can also be a cliched and hackneyed metaphor – as countless vacuous posts on Facebook would attest that say oh-so-obvious things about trips and journeys – nonetheless I do think that such a series with such a focus may well have some new things to teach us.

So, with that introduction to stimulate our imaginations, let's turn to the very first journey, the very first "road trip" recorded in the Bible. And it is not a happy road trip at all, for it is the story of Adam's and Eve's expulsion and journey from the Garden of Eden and what led up to it – that lovely, disturbing, complex story that the Hebrew people first told three millennia ago to frame a poetic way of trying to make sense of the fact of sin and evil in the world. More specifically, their questions – which have also been our questions too, along with every other human being who's ever lived – were these: *"What did we do to deserve this? What sins is God punishing us for?" Why, if God is good, does evil happen?*

All those questions become fodder, throughout both Testaments of the Bible, for folks to think about what the meaning of sin is – and what the relationship between sin and God is. Did you know that the word "sin" or "sins" is used more than 600 times in the Bible; it's a topic that inhabits the Bible's pages from Genesis to Revelation. But it is also a

concept that can be terribly misused; a wrongful emphasis on sin has driven more than one person to despair. And the story of Adam and Eve can itself be badly misunderstood and can drive us to despair, or it can teach us something about the nature of life as we too confront the same questions about sin and evil that our ancient Hebrew forebears sought to respond to with this story. This morning, then, I want to suggest that this ancient tale from the opening pages of the Bible can teach us three things in these regards.

First, let's talk about a frequent misunderstanding. This is the story, of course, that some have used to supposedly justify the notion of what gets called "original sin." You have no doubt heard of this idea – that by the disobedience of Adam and Eve every future human being is therefore cursed by their sinfulness and is caught up in sin no matter what their intentions. As the old line has it, "In Adam's fall sinned all." But this is to confuse theology with biology, for we need to be very clear about what kind of story this is. It's not a scientific story. You can examine the human genome and you will never find a gene labeled "original sin." This isn't a story, then, so much about the "how" of things but the "why" of things. It's not a story about biology, but about **meaning**. What does it mean to say God is good in the face of a world that is sometimes evil? What does it mean to say that humans are caught up in evils that no one ever intended? Now, having said that, I will also note that in a certain sense, the idea that animates the mistaken biological notion of "original sin" actually has a point. For, you see, what the idea of "original sin" is trying to explain is that sometimes things don't turn out the way that we or God had hoped and evil happens despite our intentions. You see, **Adam and Eve didn't intend the results of their actions**. Things did not turn out for them the way that God had hoped. And that is true of all of us and all of life: every single one of us is sometimes caught up in, enmeshed in, hurt or evil that no one wanted or intended. That is simply a truth about the world that the story recognizes. We are sometimes victims of the sins of others, and, sometimes, the consequences of our own actions, our own sins, extend to and even hurt people when they

didn't ask for that.

Someone once asked me why our worship services sometimes have a Prayer of Confession as part of the worship liturgy. This person wondered if sins weren't a private and individual matter, and therefore it is wrong and inappropriate to ask folks to publically confess their sins. Well, what the Adam and Eve story reminds us, I think, is that in fact while indeed sometimes there are things that we do that are more appropriate to acknowledge and make restitution for privately, there are also those things in which – perhaps through no one's fault – we find ourselves together part of sinful things that no one intended. And just as you and I receive the benefits from things that we didn't do and which weren't our responsibility or intention, there are also times when we are a part of sin and hurt that we didn't intend but which nonetheless affects us. And so a community confession is, I think, appropriate in the very same way that a community litany of praise is appropriate, even if the things we are praising are not things for which we're personally responsible! So, to sum up, the first point to be made about this old old story is that it expresses the fact that sometimes people get caught up in and affected by sin and hurt and evil, despite their intentions.

The story from Genesis also makes a second point about sin and about the way things are: sometimes evil results from good. Sometimes evil comes when the intentions of people are good. When Barbara's and my son Andrew was about a two years old or so, he had an experience I have never forgotten. I had just finished mowing the lawn and was sitting on the back porch in the sweltering Indiana summer heat, the lawnmower parked beside me. And before I knew it, Andrew had come running up, seemingly out of nowhere, exercising that powerful curiosity of a two-year-old to examine everything and he went over to the lawnmower and before I could stop him he had reached down and touched it. But he touched the still terribly hot manifold and it gave him a small but nasty burn. And he didn't cry for the longest few seconds; instead he looked puzzled and hurt, and what I saw

in his eyes was a question: “Why? How could something so interesting looking be so hurtful? His good intention – curiosity about his world – resulted in pain. And that, I think, is what happens in the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent. For the story tells us that the serpent was the “most subtle” of God’s creatures. Notice that word, “subtle.” The story does not say explicitly that the serpent was evil – it says the serpent was smart, “subtle.” And in fact the serpent appeals to Adam and Eve with good intentions, not bad: if you eat of this tree, he said, you shall have greater good, greater knowledge, greater beauty. Those aren’t evil things in and of themselves, in and of themselves they’re good things. They speak to us of the possibility of a better life. But sometimes those possibilities turn sour. Sometimes the best of intentions have bad results. It’s happened to every one of us – we have wanted to help and have ended up hurting. We have sought to make things better and ended up making them worse. Evil sometimes comes from good. And that’s not fair. But that is the way the world is, sometimes. And this story acknowledges that reality, reminding us that in a complex world where people and even creation itself has true freedom, where God is not pulling every string, sometimes bad things happen even when good was intended.

The third thing the story teaches is a poignant truth: Sometimes hurt and pain lurks even in those relationships that ought to be the best. Sometimes pain and even evil come out of those places in our lives that should have been a safe harbor from life’s storms. Right before the serpent comes on the scene in the story of Adam and Eve, there is this line in the scripture: “And the man and his wife were both naked and they were not ashamed.” And yet, as we know, by the end of the story they were both ashamed, deeply ashamed. Now it is instructive to realize that the word translated as “ashamed” in our English Bibles is in its earliest meanings actually the word “disappointed.” So the way the first readers of this story would have heard this verse is this: “Adam and Eve were naked and they were not disappointed.” Now, this sounds rather racy to our ears, but that

phrasing is making a very important point and that is this: you and I are made for community, we are made for intimacy, we are made for togetherness, and those things are good. Indeed, those things ought not disappoint us either. But sometimes they do. For even at the heart of the best relationships sometimes hurt and pain and sin break in – and that is indeed “disappointing.” For it shouldn’t have been that way. Husbands and wives hurt one another sometimes, children hurt parents, church folks hurt other church folks. It shouldn’t be that way but sometimes it is. And so for a third time, this story from Genesis honestly acknowledges a fact about our lives.

But this story also shows us that such hurt is not God’s vision for the world. No, God’s hope for the world is one of wholeness and abundance where none are “disappointed.” A vision of community and intimacy. And yet it does not work out that way sometimes. Why? Well, sometimes it doesn’t work out that way because folks don’t take responsibility for the things that they have done that have been hurtful, have been therefore sinful. I recall that when our children were all young, Barbara and I used to joke that we actually had an invisible fifth child whose name was “Not-Me.” You know, as in: “Who left the wet towel on the kitchen table?” “Not-Me.” And you know how it goes; when no one takes rightful responsibility the outcome is that all of us live less well than we might. And so this story from Genesis suggests that **sometimes** evil comes because human beings do not take responsibility for their actions. And when that happens, the result can be unfairness and hurt that nobody wanted and nobody intended and that sticks to both the good and the bad alike, those responsible and those not.

Let us recap: the story of Adam and Eve is an attempt to understand, at least in part, why there is hurt and evil in a world that a good God made for good. It tells us, to sum up, **that sometimes, first, evil happens even though no one intended it; and second, that sometimes evil comes even out of good intentions; and third, that**

sometimes even in the heart of the best of relationships hurt and pain happen. But, my friends, this rather sober and somber note is not the end of the story. For as you know, the story goes on to say that Adam and Eve were banished from the garden on that first, sad Biblical road trip. But did you catch this: even as they made their way out of the garden, God provided them with clothing and a place to go and a way to survive. Even amidst pain and sin and suffering, God provided new possibilities, God provided hope and a way to go on to find a life that could yet be good. And that is the good news in this story; that is the gospel: that even amidst the hurt and unfairness and sins of life – God is never absent. God is never vindictive. God never gives up. God’s covenant with humanity is to continue to be there always offering each of us the possibility of transformation and renewal and hope. Wherever the ;journey takes us, whatever way the road winds, God is our companion on that road trip. And for that good news, thanks be to God indeed. Amen.