

Once again, world news is hijacking my sermons; the Adam and Eve story led me to many reflections on sin and temptation at personal levels, but these days there is no choice but to think of sin and evil at international levels. We've surely all heard that the United States and Israel have begun military attacks on Iran. We essentially *started* a new war; well, actually the president started a war without consultation with Congress, and many have already been killed in Iran and Israel. I'm getting sick of talking about the horrors of war, about trying to solve things with war, and about threatening destruction to anyone who will not submit to our demands.

But I do need to start with a few words about the Adam and Eve story and Paul's interpretation of it in Romans 5; and personal morals may actually apply to international ethics.

*First of all, I join many scholars who view the first few chapters of the Bible as "stories," myths that seek to explain some things about life. It is natural not to be literal about a talking snake, or Eve coming from a rib, removed while Adam was sleeping! What's the meaning of the story?...while viewing Adam and Eve as symbols, prototypes.*

One of the most common meanings of the Adam and Eve story has to do with sin or "original sin." Again, an attempt to explain in a literal fashion leads to all kinds of questions. If the forbidden fruit was on a tree of "knowing good and evil," why would God forbid them to seek such knowledge? It makes little sense... since the rest of the Bible tries to get humans to seek the good and resist evil! Also, the command seems arbitrary and unfair... so many trees with good fruit and a delight to eyes, but don't eat from that one? The meaning of the story *can't be simply that sin is about obedience and disobedience*, to an arbitrary, rather tyrannical God, who is putting forth a test. There must be a deeper meaning.

One truth or lesson is that we can't be totally like God, knowing all there is to know about good and evil. We can't "**play God**," and neither can we claim to have all the answers. No one likes a know-it-all! Arrogance pushes away, causes a deaf ear. Rather, we must be humble and cautious about judging. Yes, we need to do our best to follow all that we believe to be good, and resist all that we believe to be evil... but any of us could be wrong in our judgments. That's why we have such a polarized world; both sides think they know what is the right path and what is the wrong path. Some may say they are "Freedom fighters." But others may say they are "terrorists." In war, each side tries to claim that violence was necessary, or even just an act of self-defense. In the interpersonal realm, the need to be "right" and prove the other party wrong can destroy relationships. Humility is what is called for. Also prayer: to ask God and our Lord Jesus what would be best for us to say or do. We reach too high to claim full knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong. It usually implies that we refuse to listen to others, refuse to consider an alternate viewpoint.

Another truth that seems to come out of this story is that the **freedom** we want and are often given does have its **limits**. Adam and Eve were free to taste so many wonderful fruits in the garden, but "Hey, watch out for that tree over there, eat of that one and you will die." The deeper meaning it seems is that God is saying you can't have everything you want. Don't be one of those people who is never satisfied. At the personal level, we know this to be true... Imagine the all-you-can-eat buffet! We can't try every dish that is offered and stuff ourselves full, or we pay a painful price! We could think of money... and remember Jesus' warning not to save and store more and more, as your very life could suddenly be taken.

One commentator I was reading made a very interesting point, a kind of "anti-literal" reading. We find out that Adam and Eve did not

follow and they disobeyed God, and they ate of the fruit... but they *did not die* as God had said. It is an early glimpse of Grace in the Old Testament! They did not literally die, but they did suffer “**consequences**” of eating of the tree of knowledge... their eyes were opened, and seeing that they were naked, they made loin cloths from fig leaves. Some commentators interpret this part of the story as leaving sexual innocence, a very natural thing, yet discovering the nuances, the vulnerabilities, the complexities of intimate relationships. One rabbi I read saw the whole story of Adam and Eve as simply one of **human development**... no actual sin and disobedience, just God stating that there will be consequences of eating of the tree of knowledge.

Knowledge of good and evil does indeed cause us greater responsibility, and working on ethics and morals is hard work. Yes, there are sleepless nights, trying to hear and understand both sides of a conflict.... I often ask: where are the peacemakers? Where are the negotiators, those who are good at dialogue, who listen with understanding and work on compromises?

Adam and Eve were no longer in the garden of Eden, no longer in some sort of paradise. Paradise lost is also innocence lost; the world can have plenty of evil, plenty of abuse and killing. It did not take long, for their very children, Cain and Abel, hated each other and Cain then killed Abel. World history is unfortunately laden with the history of oppression and killing.

Where is there good news? We remember that in the Creation Story, God did not punish Adam and Eve with death. (They just learned the reality of consequences in life, and that it would take hard work to wrestle with questions of good and evil, work to till the soil, and that there would also be labor pains in bearing children and bringing them up.)

Paul is always announcing good news of Grace: that the power of Love and Grace in Christ are stronger than all the powers of sin and death. Paul makes the argument that sin and death came into the world starting with one man, Adam. Somehow they got passed along from generation to generation. While there are unusual occurrences of mental illness in the genes, it seems sinful ways are exemplified by parents; children *learn* how to hate and how to attack others. Most bullies were first bullied by someone, even a parent. They make the decision to dominate others. By the same token, to love a neighbor or a family member is a decision, an act of will. Love can warm a heart and convert hatred, just as light can push out darkness.

So we are entering that sad sad time of war, now with Iran. Since we, with Israel, started it, Iran had no choice but to retaliate, and now there are many casualties on both sides. Violence is escalating and fears growing, even in our own cities and military bases here.

But as people of faith, can we believe, with Paul, that where sin increases, grace can abound all the more (Romans 5:20). Even though sin and death continued with all who came after Adam, grace and love came into the world even more through Jesus Christ. This is to say that the world is full of sin and destruction, but the powers of goodness and upbuilding love are always greater if we choose to receive and use them. The world, including our own leaders, operates so much out of fear and escalating fear... (so it's easier to kill the other group rather than work on peaceful coexistence.) Jesus said "Love casts out fear." This can be true in both personal and international situations. Fear and a violent separation can always be countered by the Risk of getting together and negotiating in good faith, with good will! We need to trust this gospel promise, that Grace and Love ARE greater than sin and death, both interpersonally AND internationally!