

Strange Provisions: A Sermons Series preached at Emory Presbyterian Church (Atlanta, GA)

Part 1: Tilling Cursed Ground

(Matthew 4:12-17); Genesis 3:8-24

January 22, 2017

Our third scripture reading this morning continues from Genesis 3:14 to the end of the chapter. Continue to listen for God's word for us this morning:

Then the Lord God spoke to the serpent, saying "Because you have done this, *cursed are you* among all animals, domesticated and wild. You shall move upon your belly and eat dust all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they shall strike your head, and you shall strike their heel." To the woman, God said this: "I will greatly increase the pain of childbearing; in pain, you shall bring forth children, yet you shall nonetheless desire your husband, and he shall rule over you." And lastly, to the man, God said this "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' *cursed be the ground*, for your sake. Through painful toil, you will eat of it all the days of your life; both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; but you *will* eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you *will* eat your food, until you return to the ground, since it is from the ground that you were taken. You are dust, and to the dust you shall return."

The man called his wife Eve, 'the living one,' because she would become the mother of all the living. *And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and Eve, and clothed them.*

Then the Lord God said, "See, humanity has become like us, knowing good and evil—and now they may reach out a hand to take also from the tree of life, and eat and live forever." So the Lord God sent them forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which man had been taken. He drove them out; and at the east end of the garden, God placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

This is the word of God, for the people of God. **Thanks Be to God.**

This morning I am beginning a three part sermon series that I'm calling "Strange Provisions." I've borrowed this title from a passage written by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Bishop Jeremy Taylor, in an essay

entitled “The Miracles of Divine Mercy.” In the essay, Taylor, who is often referred to as the “Shakespeare of the Divines,” ruminates upon all the little graces and miraculous provisions by which human life comes about and is sustained. “Is it not a great thing,” he writes, “that God hath made such strange provisions for our health?...That which I observe in this whole affair is, that there are, both for the providence of our tables and the relief of our sicknesses, so many miracles of Providence, that they give plain demonstration what relation we bear to heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Taking the long view, the cumulative effect of all the strange little provisions God has worked into creation is, according to Taylor, “a plain demonstration” of God’s love for humankind, and, indeed, for all creation.

Contrast this, however, with the rather dysfunctional description of humanity’s relationship with God as described in Genesis 3, and, well, perhaps the demonstration is not so plain as Taylor would have us believe. In fact, once we move beyond the poetic hymn to God’s creative work in chapter 1, the beginning of the book of Genesis seems to paint a dark picture of God’s treatment of humanity, and human beings’ treatment of God. In our scripture this morning, we hear an epic saga of desire and willfulness, deceit, disappointment, sadness, and, strangely enough, provision. Next week, we will examine Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Able, and the Sunday after, the tower of Babel. In each case, we are confronted by the sometimes morbid reality of the human condition; but in each case, we nonetheless also see God’s strange provisions as well.

So in the story of Adam and Eve, their eating of the forbidden fruit and subsequent expulsion from the garden of Eden, what strange provisions can be found? It is worth thinking back to the beginning—no, not “in the beginning” (not that far back!)—but to the most basic elements of this story. There is the conversation with the serpent, the decision to eat the forbidden fruit, the fallout from that, and finally God’s judgment against humankind for their disobedience. In each phase of this story, one finds oneself wondering “why?” Why did the serpent put the idea into the woman’s head to eat the fruit? Why did she do it? Why did Adam? How could paradise have been so easily derailed? And did God really have to be so *cruel* to them?

I’m not going to stand in this pulpit and claim to have all the answers to these questions. What I will say is that while the views of biblical interpreters vary widely on these questions, most folks can at least agree on one thing: people need to stop blaming *Eve* for this whole situation. This seems like a particularly pertinent point on the morning after nearly 3 million Americans, and people around the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *The Beauties of Jeremy Taylor* (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1834), pp. 155-6.

world, all marched to affirm that women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights.

As the great feminist theologian and biblical interpreter Phyllis Trible pointed out in her famous 1973 address to the Andover Theological Seminary on Genesis 2-3, in what was, at the time, a game changing rereading of this passage, both man and woman were created equal, as it states in Genesis 1. But in Genesis two, when the sexes are created individually, once again both are created equally, through careful, intentional work by the Creator, and shaped out of fragile materials: dust for the man, and a dusty rib for the woman. In Genesis 3, it is the woman whom the serpent addresses, not because she is the "weaker sex," but perhaps because she is can better understand the shrewdness of the serpent. She is the one who takes the initiative. She is the one who contemplates and weighs both the divine commandment *not* to eat of the tree and the potential benefits of doing so—as well as the new information that the serpent has given her that they *will not die* if they eat it. And it is the woman who acts, and the man who mutely, unquestioningly, maybe even dumbly follows suit.

"The contrast between woman and man fades after their acts of disobedience," Trible goes on to say. They both become aware of their nakedness; they are both ashamed, and they *both* sew loincloths out of fig leaves. They both hide, and they both answer the questions the Lord God puts to them not by blaming one another, but first by blaming God, and then the Serpent. In the garden, in their original state, "man and woman know harmony and equality." It is only once the effects of their decisions to defy the commandment of God take hold that things begin to break down. As Trible concludes, "The suffering and oppression we women and men know now are marks of our fall, not of our creation. Rather than legitimating the patriarchal culture from which it comes, the myth places that culture under judgment."<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to the next round of questions: why did God command them not to eat of the tree? Why did God exact a punishment upon them? And why, at the end of it all, did God nonetheless make and provide them with a set of clothes?

Answers to these questions are no less difficult to come by. That being said, we ought not let some common misunderstandings of the end of this story make finding those answers even harder. So first of all, we must recognize that life in the garden paradise of Eden was not completely without its

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<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread*  
<[https://www.udayton.edu/gened/\\_resources/docs/Eve\\_and\\_Adam.pdf](https://www.udayton.edu/gened/_resources/docs/Eve_and_Adam.pdf)>.

struggles. There was loneliness there. And ignorance. And desire. And the power to do what is right—what God commands—and what is wrong. These are already features of the human experience before the fallout. As theologian D.J. Hall remarks in his book *God and Human Suffering*, “Life without suffering...would be a form of death. Life depends in some mysterious way on the struggle to be.”<sup>3</sup> That struggle, however, has consequences. One can struggle rightly and struggle wrongly—and this is where the judgment of God comes in.

It is also worth noting that *humanity* is not “cursed” by God for eating the forbidden fruit. The snake is cursed. The ground, out of which humanity is formed and to which we all return, is cursed. But God does not curse the man with toil. God does not curse the woman with the pain of childbirth. Rather, as Phyllis Trible points out, God’s statements are descriptive, rather than proscriptive. God reveals to humankind what it will be like for men and women to live into the autonomy they have gained through the knowledge of good and evil. And the picture God paints isn’t pretty. It is dark. It is challenging. But let’s all be clear about one thing: the “fall” of humanity is not God’s fault. It is the fallout of *human*, rather than *divine* action. “Cursed be the ground,” says the Lord, “because of you.”

We can wonder why God made humanity in this way. We can wonder why humankind has failed and continues to fail to abide by God’s commandments, falling short of justice, mercy, compassion, faithfulness, and love. There is a time and a place to ask, why did it happen this way? Who is to blame? How could it come to this? And these are all rich and important questions. There is a time for this kind of reflection and explanation: but in many ways, this time, our time, no longer feels like the time to ask such questions. That time seems to have passed. Whether the answers we sought are clear are not, this moment, this season, around the world, here in the United States, here in this church—this feels like a moment in which we have find ourselves cast adrift on cursed ground, and we must ask one another, and we must ask God, what’s next? Where do we go from here?

It is a strange provision that God makes plain the situation in which we find ourselves. By hook or by crook, humanity is out here on cursed ground, in amidst the thorns and thistles, trying to make our daily bread. I always thought that the last little detail of the story—that God made Adam and Eve garments to wear—seemed a little strange. They already had clothes...why did God provide them with more? One biblical interpreter describes this act as “clothing the clothed,” a metaphor of the abundance

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<sup>3</sup> D.J. Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 53,62. It is also worth noting that immortality is not necessarily indicated in the garden. Rather, immortality can only be obtained by eating of the tree of life, which human beings are forbidden from doing. So death is a part of life, even in paradise.

of God's grace. Another points out that amidst the thorns of the field, a fig-leaf loin cloth wasn't going to cut it. The thicker clothing that God provides is the kind of gift that is both thought provoking and practical—strange provisions in a world where God seems to have abandoned God's people to their own devices.

It is a time of great trepidation in our nation. In his inaugural address on Friday afternoon, President Trump described America as a country besieged by economic and cultural uncertainties, in a world that is increasingly hostile and dangerous. And as the marches and protests around the country and in this city indicate, he may have been right about that in the most general sense. But as the people of God, man and woman and everything in between, who alike were molded from fragile ingredients by the hands of God to live and struggle and rejoice and sorrow together in this world, this moment calls for us to recognize our fundamental connectedness to one another. As believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, this moment calls for us not only to hear the promise of the Gospel, but to embody it as well.

This is, indeed, as some progressives have argued, a moment of strange provision—an opportunity to see the cursed ground of this country for what it is; to name it, and to set to work amidst the thorns and thistles. It is, as the Rev. Willie T. Barber said this week, a moment to “Stand up, not to stand down,” and, furthermore, to engage in the work of “a movement, not a moment.” Confronting the cursed ground of injustice, poverty, violence, and degradation East of Eden is fearful and tiring work. But it is the work that our teacher and our savior has called us to.

Jesus was not afraid to till cursed ground. As our passage from the gospel of Matthew tells us this morning, he made his home in Capernaum, in the historic region of Zebulun and Naphtali—a region that the prophecy of Isaiah describes as “a dark land,” even, “the land of the shadow of death.” There among the thorns and thistles of imperial Rome and leprosy and demon possessions and patriarchal oppression, Jesus was the strange provision of God—fully human, fully God. He toiled alongside his fellow human beings upon cursed ground, even as he was the bread of life that can satiate our hunger: the living water that slakes our thirst. So we, as members of the body of Christ, must draw upon his spirit as we set to work tilling cursed ground, not because we have been *condemned* to this life of toil, but because we have received the strange provision of God's abundant grace through the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. May the work of all of us here, and of this church, be a reflection of that grace. Amen.