

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – PROPER 5

June 7, 2015

Genesis 3:1-15, 21

"A Family Story"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Every family has its stories – how grandma and grandpa met. How they squeaked through on little or nothing while He was going to grad school. Or, maybe how mom and dad worked together to grow a business from scratch.

My dad tells about how his grandmother back in Norway took in laundry from some of the neighbors in order to make a little extra money. He recalls seeing her washing clothes on the rocks in the river!

One of my favorite stories was of the time he and his mother and three siblings emigrated to America.

After they got off the boat and went through the long immigration process they were all famished and tired, and wanted to know when they could get some supper.

They had checked into the hotel room where they were to stay overnight in New York, and his mother asked John to ask the hotel staff when supper would be served. My father had learned a little English, but he was painfully shy at 15 so he had his mother practice saying, over and over again, *"When do we eat? When do we eat?"*

After they thought she had it down, they rang a bell for the hotel staff to come to their room. But when the bell boy came to the door, his mom had forgotten, and so she dragged my father out from under the bed where he had hidden and made him ask the question! He was mortified!

Who would have thought that some day he would stand confidently in front of a classroom of seminary students lecturing about Isaiah?

I'm thankful I had the chance, during my mother's last years, to sit with her as she told me some of her family's stories; which, of course, are also my stories.

She was so proud that her father ran the power plant in their town of Northwood, North Dakota. Whenever he had an overnight shift, she loved to walk to the power plant with his supper and sit there talking with him while he ate it.

My parents met at Augsburg College, and after graduation, my mom went off to teach in a one room school house in Portland, North Dakota. My dad claimed that he rescued her from that when he proposed to her and they got married.

One story they liked to tell was about driving to grad school in Hartford in an old clunker of a car that burned oil like crazy.

They loaded the trunk and back seat with cans of motor oil, and stopped every 100 miles or so to replenish the oil that had burned off. Somehow they made it safely, and the rest, as they say, is history.

As I said, every family has their ancient stories. Stories that tell us something about ourselves and about where we come from. They sometimes give us hints about where we get some of our personality traits, like stubbornness or compassion or cleverness or a sense of humor.

The first story from the book of Genesis is one of those family stories. These stories shouldn't be read as history or science. Rather, they are faith stories which attempt to tell us about God and about our human nature and our relationship with our creator.

Bible scholar Claus Westermann says,

“These first chapters of the Bible were never intended to do what is, in fact, impossible for them – namely, give a historical or scientific description of the origin of the world and of the human race. They are the product of a confession – that God is the creator of the world and the Lord of its history.”

All the elements we find in this morning's story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – disobedience to God, the attempt to hide from God after disobeying, and the willingness to immediately blame others for our own sins – all of these details tell us that **this story is, indeed, our story.**

God had given Adam and Eve only one rule – one command. He said they could eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, but they weren't supposed to touch the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

God loves the human beings he created, and gives this command knowing it's best for them. But we don't like to let God be in control. We want to decide for ourselves.

What happens in the story? We read,

*“The serpent 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.’

Do you ever wonder if there really was a serpent who tempted the woman and got her to disobey God?

This question is very **important to those Christian fundamentalists who hold a literalist view of the bible.** But really, **what difference does it make, when it comes to our own situation?**

The truth is, **we don't need a serpent to bring doubt and temptation into our relationship with our loving God.**

It's part of our human nature to rebel against God and try to be our own boss – to decide what's best for us. And, let's face it, whenever we are left to our own devices, we usually choose wrong.

Because, the truth is that knowing the difference between good and evil doesn't mean having the power to choose good over evil. In fact, the opposite is true.

As we say in our Sunday Morning Confession of Sin: *"We are in bondage to sin, and cannot save ourselves."*

The apostle Paul put it so brilliantly in Romans, where he says,

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Like it or not, this story of Adam and Eve's disobedience of God is **our story, as well.**

And what they do after they sin is also just like us. First, they try to hide from God. **Imagine, trying to hide from the creator of the universe!**

How do you think that's going to work? It's almost as silly as the little child Pastor Jennifer told about who was playing hide and seek. She thought if she covered her eyes and couldn't see her playmates, then they couldn't see her, either.

Trying to hide our sins from God makes about as much sense.

But my favorite part of the story is how Adam and Eve react when God calls them out about their sin.

They refuse to take responsibility for their own actions, and instead they immediately **start to play the blame game.**

Any parent with more than one child has seen this same scenario repeated countless times.

Children are so good at pointing a finger at their siblings and blaming them. "She started it" or "he was doing it, too!" Of course, we adults do exactly the same thing. **We love the blame game.**

The woman blames it all on the serpent, who tricked her.

That's bad enough, but what's even worse is how the man blames the woman for offering the fruit to him.

He whines to God, *"the woman whom you gave to me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate."*

He's **blaming God** for creating the woman and giving her as a partner to the man. He's trying to say **"You know, God, it's really your fault."**

It's no fun having to admit that this ancient story is our present day story, too, but it is.

We're part of the same human family, and we can't pretend we're any different, or that we would have behaved differently if we had been there in the garden.

And so we're brought to our knees with the same cry of despair as Paul gives in Romans, "*Oh wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*"

We are sinners, no different from Adam or Eve, always wanting to be in control, rather than trusting in God.

We struggle to do what's right but, like the apostle Paul before us, we have to admit: "*I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*"

These stories are our family story.

It's depressing, isn't it?

But now LET ME SHARE **THE REST OF THE STORY.**

Because there's a **beautiful little verse** at the end of today's Old testament lesson. Did you catch it? "*And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.*"

Adam and Eve had **ruined everything** by their willful, selfish disobedience. God would have been justified in turning his back on them forever.

But GOD NEVER STOPS LOVING THEM!

Instead, **he has compassion on them and continues to care for them.**

They COULDN'T MAKE GOD STOP LOVING THEM, AND NEITHER CAN WE!

The apostle Paul understands this wonderful grace when, after his words of despair, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*" he **answers his own question by declaring:** "***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!***"

And our own family story must always conclude with this same declaration: "***THANKS BE TO GOD WHO RESCUES US FROM SIN AND DEATH THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD!***"

Oh, and when we turn to the last page of the story we will read, "***AND THEY ALL LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.***" Amen.