

**Haunted by Eden<sup>1</sup>—Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-8**  
*June 16, 2024- 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*

Adam, Eve, the serpent and the apple—it is one of the best known stories in the bible. Ask someone that's never set foot in a church to name a story from scripture it's likely they'll name this one. I think it's been given too much importance. For our Jewish siblings, with whom we share this story it does not play much of a role at all. It certainly is not on par with the exodus from Egypt, the rise of David or the Babylonian exile. In fact, the story of Eve, the apple and the serpent is only referred to a couple of times in the Hebrew scriptures.

So, why such importance in the Christian tradition? Well, let's back up a little. I have come to see the New Testament as the written record of people trying to answer the question, "how could Jesus, this man of God, the supposed saviour of the Jewish people, be executed like a common criminal?" To answer this question they turn to the tools at their disposal—their culture and their scriptures. In the scriptures they see the story of God saving the Jewish people from the final plague in Egypt (the death of first-born sons) before liberation from slavery by instructing them to sacrifice a lamb and smear the blood on their doors to mark the homes as Jewish. They also live in a culture of religious sacrifice; animals are routinely slaughtered at the temple to mark important events, and to atone for sins. With this cultural and religious background people begin to identify Jesus as the "lamb of God": the one who is sacrificed in the crucifixion to save Israel from sin—the sin brought into the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden (Romans 5: 12-21). The story of Eve, Adam and the serpent becomes central to the Christian story because it helps to make sense of what happens to Jesus. The church then adds another layer to this story to ensure a market for its services. For centuries, the church says, and some continue to say, that because of this original sin by Adam and Eve, the only way to salvation is to wash away that sin by baptism in the church.

Because of the baggage this story carries, it can be difficult to see it any other way. But Joseph Campbell, the late world-renowned expert on mythology has studied our scripture with the rigour of an academic and the artistry of a storyteller. Campbell sees the Garden of Eden as a place of unity, where the humans do not know they are different from each other, where God and humans are practically the same; God walks in the garden with them. Then Eve and Adam eat the apple and the unity disappears, they enter the world of opposites, or dualism as Barbara Brown Taylor says. Campbell says the knowledge of good and evil is the knowledge of opposites, of seeing the world in terms of opposite categories—male and female, God and human, good and evil—dualism. Nothing is the same after that, the world becomes fragmented, divided, polarized. We humans take what is whole and divide it; as a result, we become

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection relies heavily on the thoughts and analysis of Joseph Campbell in his interviews with Bill Moyers in the book *The Power of Myth*, Doubleday, 1988, pp. 5, 47-48 and 107.

alienated, set apart and self-conscious. We see that in the story, as Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness and cover themselves immediately.

Campbell says that to live is to be in a world of opposites, a world of division and dualism. To some extent this makes sense right? At dinner you want to be able to distinguish the salt from the pepper. This division, these opposites, this dualism is also the basis for our identities. It's helpful to say I'm this, but I'm not that. Too often a dominant culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation tries to wipe out differences and subsume everyone under one dominant identity. Do we have to say more about that during Pride month and on the cusp of National Indigenous People's Day? But, even as it can be helpful to make categories, to divide the world into opposites, there is a danger. It is to so fall in love with the mastery and control which dividing the world up gives us that we forget or choose to ignore the fundamental unity of all things—that we all come from one source, which we in the Christian tradition name "God".

A price is paid for ignoring or forgetting this core unity, which is the alienation experienced by Adam and Eve in our faith story. We become so set apart from each other, from creation, that the result is violence, both subtle and overt. The subtle aspect of this alienation and violence struck me recently reading about the controversy over the countryside line in Waterloo Region. Recently, through legislation, the provincial government granted permission for the building of subdivisions on farmland and natural areas previously excluded from building. This, despite concern over the impact on groundwater. I'm struck by the dualistic, opposite stance of "undeveloped" versus "developed" land. Why is land that has a forest, wildlife and preserves the integrity of our groundwater considered undeveloped? While land that is cleared, built on and that heavily taxes the environment is considered developed? It's language that subtly sets us apart from creation, suggesting there is no or limited human benefit to untouched nature until it is bulldozed and manipulated to fit certain short-term interests. A more overt example is the global heating crisis; I would say at it's core it is a spiritual crisis, caused by our refusal to see ourselves as part of creation, resting in the mastery of control and being blind and/or willfully ignorant of the fundamental unity at the heart of creation. We treat the planet as something apart from us; we act as if the health of the planet and all living things on it don't affect us. We keep running away from Eden.

This ancient, well-known and misinterpreted story of faith is saying that behind all the divisions, all the opposites there is a unity to life. It is one of the gifts of the white church opening to Indigenous spirituality to be reminded of the sacredness of everyday living, that Spirit infuses all people, all of creation, that God is not just a Sunday thing or an after-life thing. There is a great unity at the heart of all people, all creation.

It is his commitment to this great truth which costs Jesus his life. Jesus is a threat to those who benefit from the carving up of the world into opposites in his day and ours. The beauty and glory of Jesus is his seeing beyond the categories of sinner and righteous, rich and poor, man and woman, disabled and able-bodied, Jew and gentile, child and adult. Jesus sees beyond the world of opposites to expose the glory of God that lives in the

hearts of the people he encounters. Jesus sees beyond the world of opposites to the unity of Eden. This is how Jesus saves us.

The former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, Peter Short once used a phrase that sticks with me still, he said, “we are haunted by our memory of Eden.” In other words, even though we live in a world of opposites and dualism, a world that is divided and fragmented, there is something inside of us, a distant primal memory perhaps that longs for the unity at the heart of all things and our place in it. The kind of salvation Jesus proclaims isn’t about being spared the wrath of an angry God by believing certain things or performing certain rituals. Jesus’ salvation is about perceiving, or perhaps, remembering the unity beyond face value opposites and dualism, the unity at the heart of all things. “The kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17: 21) Jesus said. Put another way, “remember Eden”, it’s in our midst when we see the world as it really is. Amen.

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