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Women of the Bible

“Eve: The Mother of All Living Things” © - Rev. Seth D Jones

Scripture: Genesis 2:21-25; 3:11-23

From now until Christmas, we will be looking at women in the Bible, primarily the Old Testament. We will begin with Eve, and go through right up to Elizabeth and Mother Mary. My hope in this journey is that we will have a renewed and inspired view of how God is working with us and what it means to be truly human in this world as we try to follow Jesus. It is no news to any of you that women have struggled through the centuries to achieve the same recognition and rights as men. That struggle still continues. Knowing that, I will do my best as a man in a position of influence to honor that struggle and attempt to draw from each of the women we focus upon actions, thoughts, and ways of seeing that raise up these women as models for all of us.

We begin where Scripture begins, with the ‘first woman’ - Eve. We do not need to be literalists to draw powerful meaning from the creation story for our spiritual and physical lives. Nor do we need to be devotees of the mythic to recognize that there is some deep truth available by reading this story as if it were literally true. To paraphrase the great British theologian, CS Lewis, ‘The Bible is filled with true myths’. Whether we take it as a factual accounting, or read it as myth, we need to begin this whole discussion by recognizing we bring to the Bible in general, and the story of Adam and Eve in particular, a whole truckload of baggage with us as we read this.

We need to remember that Eve is used as the excuse for the sorry lot of humanity for many a millenia. Women have paid a huge and continuing price for a tragic and deliberate misreading of the Creation story. The Bible itself acknowledges this and presents the situation as a curse in Genesis 3. There, God tells Adam and Eve what has happened to them in the Garden. In Genesis 3:16, God says to Eve,

*“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you.”*

Inequality is part of the cost for whatever went down in the Garden. Inequality is not the way things are supposed to be, but is a consequence for things that happened. For many, many male interpreters of the Bible, there seems to be a strong and powerful desire to maintain the curse throughout time, to hold it up as an example of how to live, rather than a statement for the state of how things are. Listen to Tertullian (155-240AD) as he speaks on our story today:

*“Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilty must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You so*

*carelessly destroyed man, God's image. On account of your desert, even the Son of God had to die."*

Wow. It appears that there is always a good time for a #MeToo movement. Tertullian and many men throughout the centuries, including now, would benefit from starting an #ImListening movement, instead of a campaign of dehumanizing language and behavior.<sup>1</sup>

I am always encouraged when my questions about things mirror the questions great thinkers ask. One of my favorite historians is Heather Cox Richardson, who appears often on NPR to reflect on presidential history. Her question for things like the interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3 we have been living with for these many centuries is, "*Why? Who is benefiting from this?*" The benefit to men to suppress half the population, like Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, and many others advocated, has always been hazy to me. That thought speaks to good training and upbringing from the women in my life as a child and as an adult. The benefit men have created, and the desire to impose control and have power is, I believe, a universal human drive. What helps is to have divinely inspired but misinterpreted texts to back you up when you are controlling and disempowering people.

Who, then, is Eve? Well, let's begin with why her name is Eve. Eve means something close to "*Mother of All Living*". This is the name Adam chooses for her. It is a powerful and moving recognition of the nature of the Divine Image which Adam recognizes within Eve. In Eve, Adam sees what it means to mother Creation in the way God mothers Creation. Eve is distinctly different than any other creature in the Garden.

Let us remember why Eve was created in the first place. Something is wrong with Adam while he is alone. God realizes that loneliness is not good for the first human, so God intuits that Adam needs an *ezer*, a helpmeet, an equal companion. God creates a bunch of animals, thinking that a cow, a hummingbird, a bee, a platypus, an otter, a wolf, a tapir might fill the need of Adam for a companion. Adam names all these creatures, but none satisfy. Then God puts Adam to sleep and creates Eve from his side. Immediately, when he lays his eyes upon the first 'her', Adam falls in love with Eve.

Take a moment and reflect on what has happened here. Think about what is going on when someone needs help, especially if someone requests help for another person. The help that is sought is not from someone who is weaker, less capable, and in more need of help than the person being helped. No, it is quite the opposite. A helper is someone who is able to step in and use their strength, knowledge and power in such a way to bring the person back to a more stable state. What does this say about Adam that he needed a helper, an *ezer* in Hebrew. Because whenever this word is used anywhere else in Scripture it is used for God and people who deliver and save other people, people who are suffering, people who are in trouble, people who are incapable of helping themselves.

William Law, the great 17th century theologian, and proto-Congregationalist, said of Eve:

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<sup>1</sup> This idea comes from Lynn H. Cohick in the article, *The Martyrs and #MeToo*, which appears in a special insert entitled "Heard" in Christianity Today magazine. You can find it at [www.christianitytoday.com/women](http://www.christianitytoday.com/women).

Eve was created to help Adam recover from the ‘Fall’ *to establish himself in paradise and in the favor, fellowship and service of his maker*”.<sup>2</sup>

Eve is Adam’s deliverer, rescuer, savior. Tertullian knew Hebrew. He knew the Bible. How did he miss that part of who Eve is? How have we?

When I was a kid, I spent Saturday mornings watching Star Trek. I was lucky because the original series would be on, but so also was the cartoon of the original series. Both were great, and all the Star Trek iterations were formative in my childhood, my teen years, and my adulthood. Each Star Trek began with the same phrase:

*“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before!”*

The phrase and all the series based on the Original Series have this powerful curiosity at the center of their story lines. (In the Next Generation series, they thankfully corrected the androcentric wording of the opening phrase to say, *to boldly go where no one has gone before*.) That curiosity, that desire to seek new worlds, to seek out new life and go where no one has gone before is, I submit to you, the spirit and tradition of Eve. Unlike Adam, who is a passive receiver of all that God has given and created, Eve does stuff. She acts, and in acting, becomes truly human. As Susan Niditch says about Eve in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*,

*“The realization that to be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits is to be quintessentially human.”*<sup>3</sup>

In the Garden, it is God who gives new life. God is the generative force in the boundaries of the Garden. The tree at the center of that Garden is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is off limits and *on the day you eat of it, you will die*, God says. The thing of it is, though, is that this is sort of the ultimate set-up, isn’t it? God wants obedience to this command so that Adam, and then Eve, do not become like gods in knowing what gods know, but God wants this obedience to be freely chosen by God’s Creation. Here is my eternal question about that set-up: *How is it possible to know what obedience is unless you have broken rules to understand what disobedience means? How can one freely choose anything unless she knows the inability to choose?* It makes me very curious.

I think Eve was curious as well. And the snake knows that as well. And so, the first conscious, independent, fully chosen act in the Garden by God’s strange and bizarre creation, this Adam and this Eve, is to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Things happen fast after that. Shame comes into the world, into the awareness of Adam and Eve. They know themselves to be individuals who are different from one another and from God. They become conscious, fully aware, free actors in the world. The Garden cannot contain such a thing, and so God ejects them from the Garden.

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<sup>2</sup> from an article entitled *Another Look at Eve* by Jane McNally, found at [www.godswordtowomen.org](http://www.godswordtowomen.org). Accessed 9/5/18

<sup>3</sup> pg 17, *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Niditch’s commentary on Genesis 2 and 3.

The price of self-knowledge - the other word for this is *wisdom*, which is always portrayed as a woman in Scripture - is the awareness of ignorance, brokenness, and separation in the self and others. And so God's curse in Genesis 3 covers all the areas where our wisdom is required, where our discernment of Good and Evil is required, where our faith is required. Wisdom is required in our relationships with creation, in our relationships with our partners, and with our work. Eve is not the cause of the ejection from the Garden; Eve is why we have the wisdom to think through our difficulties outside of the Garden.

Outside the Garden, Eve is the generative force in the world. Which is why she is named "Mother of All Living Things". In other words, the spirit of Eve is continually resisting the curse of living in the world, and she is the source of our wisdom to do so, as well as the source of our awareness and self-knowledge to understand good from evil.

The power of Eve is continual and is seen best in our modern world in political realms. Rather than focusing on what is happening today, I will read you a quote from Abigail Adams to her husband, John, while he worked at creating the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in 1776. John and Abigail were a loving couple and prolific letter writers, and Abigail shows herself to be at least John's equal, if not more, in her political thought. She says, in a letter dated March 31st, 1776,

"I long to hear that you have declared an independency ...in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."

Abigail had no influence over her husband with regard to all this and it wasn't until the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920 that woman would have the power of a vote in America. But that quote I read to you was virtually memorized by every leader of the Suffragette movement as a foundational moment in our country's history.

In a very real, spiritual sense, though, there is one other source of overcoming that curse in Genesis 3, another person who acts in the strong, helping tradition of Eve. If the Cross and Resurrection of Christ does anything, it restores our relationship to God, and in restoring our relationship to God, that means restoring our relationship with the Earth, restoring our relationship with those we love, and restoring our relationship with our work. Jesus reverses out Genesis 3, following in the footsteps of all the women who are named in his lineage and the women in Scripture who are acting in the wisdom, strength, and curiosity and seeking of new life which Eve pioneered for them and for us.

Knowing then that the curse of Genesis 3 has been resisted for eons by those acting on Eve's behalf and that it has been reversed by Jesus, why would we, dear follower of the mothering God we worship, why would we ever want to live and follow anything that fulfills that curse, particularly the part where people rule over other people, where a curse tells us women will be ruled over by men? As a follower of Jesus, is it in any way acceptable to still live under this curse, let alone any curse?

Let us instead live into the divine, curious, earthy humanity that Eve has modeled and Jesus has fulfilled, for Eve is indeed the Mother of All Living Things.  
Amen.