

09/11/2016 - Pentecost 17 - Narrative Lectionary Week 1

“God Walks; We Hide: Sin, Shame, Forgiveness” - Rev. Seth Jones ©

Scripture: Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17, 3:1-8

This week, we begin a new way of going through Scripture called the Narrative Lectionary. It was created by a few of my professors at Luther Seminary and, rather than trying to find themes across Scripture from week to week, it takes a large theme of Scripture and follows it through the arc of Scripture from start to finish each year. This year, the focus is the Promise of God, and the Gospel used for this is Luke. The Narrative Lectionary uses large blocks of a single story to create a picture throughout the year. And so this week we begin with Genesis and the Promises of God in the Garden.

If you turn to **page 2** in your bible, we begin with what many scholars consider a second, separate creation story. Throughout the coming year, we will flip back and forth between stories of sin and falling from grace and the unrelenting promises of God. This week, we look at the so-called “Fall” story.

Let’s look at the ground of the story, which is also our story. Right from the beginning, we see, as we spoke of a few weeks ago in our Psalm series, that we are completely and wholly created beings. Our life is completely dependent on God. Look at **Chapter 2, verse 7**:

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

God is the source of everything we call “life”. God makes us “living beings”.

What makes us ‘alive’? In the ancient world of Scripture, physical life and spiritual life were inseparable. To breathe was to be in God, and to be in God was to breathe and be alive. This is why Peter can say in his letter, on **page 233** in the New Testament:

⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)*

Part of what this creation story is showing us is that our inner being - “God’s breath” - is reflected in the outer world - the garden of Eden. There is a purity, an innocence, a complete freedom, an absence of evil in this place, where there is no break between our inner experience of God and our outer experience of God’s creation.

But there is a break between our inner and outer experience of God and our relationship to God. None of us would be here if we believed that there weren’t some unbridgeable distance between ourselves and God. We have, in the words of the tradition, “fallen” in some way. We have “fallen away” from the promises of God, and that is what this story is all about.

The words we give to what causes that break is ‘sin’. And so we have this story of Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden and the shame that they feel because of it. Look at **page 3, in chapter 3**. Look at how the story unfolds. The snake comes and introduces the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil to Eve. The snake and Eve have a conversation, which is confusing enough. The snake says in verse 4, “*You will not die*”, even though God has said, “*in*

the day that you eat of the fruit you shall die.” I would ask that you imagine you are hearing this for the first time, and simply ask yourself, “What actually happens here” and perhaps “Why didn’t God do what God said he was going to do?” Maybe there is a bigger promise, and maybe the sin of the garden isn’t what we think it is.

The promise is to be God’s gardener, to tend as Paul says in ***Philippians, chapter 4:8, on page 198,***

whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable (Phil 4:8)

Look at what the Genesis story says, though, after Eve and Adam eat the fruit, in ***verse 7, on page 2,***

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked.

They cover themselves. God walks through the garden, and

The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God.

Much of the tradition frames this as a story of disobedience, and that is presented to us as the great sin of the Garden of Eden. All of us have drunk from that water most of our lives, whether you are a Protestant or Catholic. The ‘original sin’ it is sometimes called, and it is named *disobedience*.

I want to suggest to you, though, that what truly breaks our relationship to the promises of God is **shame**. Perhaps the act itself isn’t the great sin that sets us outside the Garden, but the shame we feel as a result of the act. The serpent leads Eve and Adam to shame, not to disobedience. Isn’t that what these last lines from our reading today suggest?

Brene Brown is a storyteller and teacher who has a PhD in social work. Her focus of research is the destructive power of shame in our relationships, and also the power of vulnerability in healing those relationships. According to her, shame is the single greatest force of destruction in our relationships with one another. Shame is how we ‘*stay small*’ in the world. The phrase she used for shame in her TEDtalk, called “*Listening to Shame*”¹, which I recommend to all of you, is that ‘*shame is the swampland of the soul*’. Shame is what tells you and I that we aren’t good enough and that we will never be good enough.

Let’s clarify some terms before we continue. **Guilt** is all about what we have done. It is a behavior issue. Guilt is managed by acts of apology and changing behaviors. We can do something about guilt. **Shame** is all about who we are. Shame is an identity issue. When we feel shame, we feel that the core of our being is negated, subjugated, destroyed. **Humiliation** is what we do to other people who we think are guilty of some offense. Or we do it to ourselves so those people don’t have to. Humiliation is designed to push the guilt we feel into shame, to change the things we do into who we are.

Brene Brown puts it this way:

Guilt says, “I am sorry I made a mistake”. It is adaptive.

Shame says, “I am sorry I am a mistake”. It is fixed deep in our personal identity.

Take that in for a moment. Which is easier to deal with, whether you are looking inside yourself or dealing with another person? Guilt, of course. But the eradication of shame requires far more

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame

work than the expiation of guilt. Adam and Eve are *guilty* of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; but they are in a state of *shame* when they realize what they have done. *Shame* hides us from God. When we are in shame, we seek to disappear from the presence of God, just like Adam and Eve, and this, my brothers and sisters, is the true sin of the Garden.

There is another great TEDtalk by a woman who fell in love with her boss. The talk is called "*The Price of Shame*"². The affair lasted over the course of a couple years, and during that time a supposed friend recorded all her phone conversations about the affair. The story broke, and the affair ended.

The supposed friend released the recordings on the internet. Very quickly, this woman had the horrific reputation of being, as she calls it, "*Patient Zero of losing her reputation online*". Her mother and father would not let her leave home because they were afraid she would drive her car into a tree. She had to shower with the door open because her mother was afraid her daughter would slit her wrists or try to drown herself.

In 1998, the internet had just gone global, and the very first global story was this woman's affair with her boss. We now live in what she calls a "*culture of humiliation*". Remember, humiliation is the act of driving a guilty person into the world of shame. In today's parlance what happened to this woman is called cyber-bullying, online harassment, or, more colloquially, slut-shaming.

Before the internet, bullying and shaming was limited to your school or neighborhood. Now, the internet allows humiliation to go global and makes the act of humiliating another person anonymous. This woman was the first victim of this sort of global humiliation, which is now almost a daily occurrence. She is the Eve of the internet age, and the internet happily, gleefully even, slut-shamed her right out of any dignity and humanity that she thought she shared with the rest of humanity, right out of the gift of the promise of the Garden of Eden.

The problem with public humiliation and shaming is that it kills. Online shaming and bullying is one of the primary motivators of teen suicide today. Shame is designed to negate our essential dignity, that God-given breath of life within each and every one of us. Shame is meant to negate that self, your self, which God wishes to flourish, the self which God has commissioned to tend the garden of hope and love and peace and beauty and truth.

And this is what the world did to Monica Lewinsky - shamed her almost to death. Now, Monica is a spokesperson for organizations that try to eliminate cyber-bullying and online harassment. She is attempting to reverse the culture of shame we have created. As she puts it in her TEDtalk, "*We must insist on a different ending*" for those the world would shame and humiliate.

This is what the serpent does. The serpent drives Eve and Adam into an act of which they are guilty, and then pushes a little harder so that it becomes shame. The serpent is the agent of humiliation which drives us into shame, and shame is what separates us from God, not disobedience. Scripture is one long testament to disobedience. That is what human beings do. It is not who they are.

² http://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame?language=en

In the story of the Garden, there was a moment when Eve and Adam could have turned to God and changed the story. It is right at **verse 7, again on page 2**.

...the eyes of both were opened and they knew they were naked.

There is a moment of vulnerability here. Like all of us, Adam and Eve perceive vulnerability as a threat, as weakness. But according to Brene Brown, it is precisely at the moment of vulnerability that we have an opportunity to change the story. Vulnerability in our relationships, Brown says, creates a pathway to empathy, and empathy is how we begin to find our way out of the swampland of shame. Therefore, becoming vulnerable is an act of courage and strength, not weakness at all.

Empathy causes us to see through a mirror darkly the essential, God-given dignity of the other person. When we are vulnerable to the essential dignity of the breath of God in another person, we cannot be the agent which ejects a person from the original promise of God into the swamp of shame. With empathy, we can begin to, as Monica says, create a different ending to the story. Vulnerability allows us to come out of hiding and seek the very thing we say God does for us through his steadfast love - forgiveness.

Forgiving actions - guilt - is pretty easy. But allowing the love of God's forgiveness to penetrate and eradicate shame is a huge, global, spiritual operation of the highest order. The effects of shame are what send Adam and Eve out of the Garden, and once they are out of the Garden, we have the whole story of Scripture before us. How do we reverse the shame of the world?

I believe we do it by becoming agents of remembering and storytelling. We remember the promises of God in the Garden, the place where we received our essential goodness. Remember what God thinks about all of Creation? Look at **verse 31 in Genesis 1 on page 2**:

God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good.

By calling people to remember where they were created and who created them, we remind them of God's desire for us in the world, that our essential dignity and humanity is God's gift of breath within each of us. The best way to remind people of this, especially when they are in guilt and shame, is through words of forgiveness. We do this act of remembering and storytelling every Sunday when we pray the Lord's Prayer. In **Luke 11, verse 4, on page _72_**, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, and part of the prayer is

...and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

Forgiveness restores, renews, reclaims, and returns us to the first promises of God and reminds us that we are, like Adam and Eve, breathed into life by God and God alone.

As agents of remembering and storytelling, we seek out those who are in hiding, who through shame have hidden themselves from the presence of God. We model vulnerability and empathy for them. And when we remember with them the essential dignity and humanity God has given us, we begin to walk together on that long journey back to the Garden Jesus started at the Resurrection, back through the Cross, into our discipleship with him, back through the stories of the prophets and their songs of praise and lament, back through the history that led to those songs, back into the Garden again, where we, as the forgiven storytellers of God's work in

the world insist on a different ending so we can all tend to the loving, hopeful, truthful, good, just, pure, commendable, beautiful things of God's creation.

Amen.