

***Farpotshket has always been our middle name***

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17, 3:1-7

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*[This sermon was preached from a manuscript that was very hard to read. What is reconstructed here is a close approximation.]*

Have you ever had one of those times in the life of the mind when you think you're onto something, but you can't quite be sure? And so you follow it as long as you can to see what develops? I've been on one of those trips with this sermon. It's also a bit like an experience Robin and I had at the theater the other night when we went to the Guthrie and saw Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Any of you who've seen that bewildering marvel of a play probably have some idea of what I'm talking about. I'll refer to it a bit this morning, but you needn't have seen the play. Latch onto whatever intrigues you here and go with that. (I've only seen the play once, so everything I say about it here is pretty impressionistic.)

As we were leaving the theater, we ran into two of Robin's friends. One of them knows what I do for a living and said, "There's plenty of food for thought for the pulpit there, isn't there?" I wasn't sure at the time, but I do keep going back to it. And there's some way in which that play fits one of the best known but least understood stories in the Bible—the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent, particularly regarding the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. Like the story of Adam and Eve, and so like all of us, *Peer Gynt* (at least as seen through the eyes of Robert Bly and the good people at the Guthrie) is about knowledge, too, about self-knowledge and coming to terms with your life. Bly sets his version within the framework of a surprise party for a Minnesotan who's facing his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and isn't so ready to see himself in light of that reminder of mortality.

In a sense, the whole play is bookended by two mute moments, moments in which we focus on the face of the actor Mark Rylance as 50-year-old Peter reflects on his own life. In the first instance, as I recall, it's a fearful look, anxious. As he's confronted with the Big 5-O, what has his life been worth—a tin button or a golden crown? Like Peer, and perhaps like all of us, he wants to see his life as heroic, as having been of some epic importance. But in the end, what has he accomplished? What harm has he left in his wake? What can he hope for in his remaining days? Peter swoons and Ibsen's fantasy takes place in his unconscious before he awakens again. The play ends with another mute expression on the canvas of Rylance's face. If I can find the time to see the play again, I'll try to notice if his expression is the same at the beginning and the end. Very likely (Rylance being so good an actor) it's a multifaceted enough moment that what we see in his expression is what we project onto him from within ourselves. Which is a bit like what we find in this story, too.

But before finding ourselves in this story of Adam and Eve and the serpent, it's worth noting what we might expect to find there but don't. First of all, two trees are mentioned. One is the tree of life, the other the tree of knowledge. Interesting, isn't it, that the forbidden one is not the tree of life, which apparently would stave off death. What is forbidden is fruit from the tree of *knowledge*. In a lot of cultures—think of the Egyptians and their pyramids, think for that matter of the modern-day captains of industry with their seven-figure bonuses that they can't take with them—what is held out as the gold ring is the hope of immortality. We might expect that the ultimate taboo would be for humans to try to steal the fruit of the tree of life. But no. It's the tree of knowledge that becomes the

focus. We know we're not going to live forever, that life without end is beyond our capacity. But knowledge—knowledge we *can* attain, and so knowledge of some sort is the greater temptation

Just think of all the ways the story of Adam and Eve has been portrayed in art and literature through the centuries. And think of the whole doctrine of original sin (which actually came much later, not with Adam but with Augustine). The doctrine of original sin says we're supposed to have inherited moral corruption from Adam and Eve just as we inherit from our parents two eyes and a nose. (Most of us are probably more aligned with the Muslim notion that we're not evil, just forgetful, but that's a topic for another day.) With all the ways that this story has been commemorated in art and doctrine, it might surprise you to know that like a song in the air, this story basically disappears from the Hebrew Bible as soon as it's over. And it doesn't echo a whole lot in the newer testament either. Still we've made of it something archetypal. There must be a reason.

One other point here, which won't rate much mention. This is a story, as *Peer Gynt* is a story. It's not archaeology, it's not science. I'm astounded that we're still having creationism debates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This won't be one of them.

Now, about that tree. Beware the description of it in most Christian Bibles: "The tree of knowledge of good and evil." That may be a misnomer. I've checked a couple of Jewish translations this week, and I keep coming across the phrase "the tree of the knowledge of good and bad." What's in a simple word change? For one thing *good and bad* is less epic than *good and evil*. It's a little like *Peer Gynt* again. He's a playful liar who thinks of himself an emperor when he's just a simple woodsman. And while he eventually submits to temptation of every sort—he's a lovable, libidinous, greedy, power-hungry, slave-trading teller of tales with a flair for grandiosity—in the end, his sins aren't even worthy of the fires of hell. He finds—he fears—that in the grand scheme of things, his soul is only worth melting down like tin in a button mold. How disappointing. And how much like us.

*Peer* would want to eat the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but that's not what's offered him. What we're all tempted with is actually the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad. Or as a similar phrase is sometimes translated elsewhere, knowledge of this and that.

We misunderstand if we think this story says that moral reasoning is something to be guarded against. That's not what gets us into trouble. The God of all Creation doesn't want to keep Adam and Eve from knowing right and wrong. They already do. Even before she eats the fruit, Eve knows she's not supposed to. And without the susurrating suasions of the serpent, she wouldn't.

And that serpent. He's not a liar. It's part of what makes him so persuasive. What he tells Eve is actually the truth. God has said not to eat of that tree or you will surely die. But the serpent reassures her that she and Adam *won't* die after they've eaten the forbidden fruit. And they don't. They go on to be fruitful and multiply and inhabit the earth. What does die in them is their innocence. And what is born in them is guilt and complexity. They find the Pandora's box of responsibility and self-reliance.

The knowledge of good and bad, of this and that, is nothing more heroic than the stuff that makes up our days—*Peer Gynt's* wrestling with pleasure and guilt and betrayal, the temptation to go around our obstacles rather than facing them head on. The knowledge that tempts Eve and Adam is knowledge of what's in their best interest.

Why is that so difficult? What makes it dangerous? If it's not the knowledge of good and evil that's at stake, why worry about it? If we only knew what's best for us, surely that wouldn't kill us. Not only would we not die, but we'd be able to be truly fruitful and multiply, and inhabit the earth.

Do you hear it? That's the serpent whispering again.

Maybe you've had this experience. There's a simple repair that needs to be done at home. Maybe the toilet is leaking. So you go to the hardware store to get the part you think you need. The float ball flapper or whatever the stupid thingamajig is called. And you follow the instructions and do the simple installation, and then the thing just leaks worse than it did before. (Yes, there's some autobiography here!)

Or you try to do what looks like simple maintenance on your computer. And it crashes. Or maybe a government rewards its farmers for growing corn for ethanol rather than for food, but that just makes food more expensive for hungry people and creates a need for creating farmland by clear-cutting forests. Or say, one nation invades another supposedly to solve one problem and succeeds in causing a far bigger one.

Self-interest would seem to be the easiest thing to judge. It's what you'd think we'd be good at. But we aren't, and things get all *farpotshket*. (It's a Yiddish word for trying to fix something and actually making things worse.) Because true knowledge of this and that, of good and bad, of how we should be in the world, is holistic. But even more than that, it's also knowing what the unintended results of our actions will be. Eventually it becomes a question of omniscience.

Go ahead, eat the fruit of the tree of good and bad. It won't kill you, and you'll actually be more godlike. And then you look back over your life and you wonder what you've really done.

Remember, this isn't a story about good and evil. It's not a heavily moral tale. The point isn't that we shouldn't eat of the tree of knowledge. It's already done! We do it all the time. It's what it is to be human. Here Paul and Augustine had it right; what Adam and Eve "did" is binding on us, but not because they did it in any historical or causal sense. It's just that to be human is to try to live with knowledge beyond our full grasp.

This is the world we live in. We make mistakes all the time, despite our best intentions. Thus the need to always be open to correction, to better understanding, and to the notion that others may have a better idea than we do (and that we may have something to add that others simply have not seen)

Traditionally biblical commentators turn here and point to the sin of seeking to be autonomous, and "turning away from God's commandments." But this is a tale of human nature, not of sin itself. This story never mentions sin. Commentators let slip the prize when they say the answer is to obey the commandments of God as if that were a simple thing—simple not in its doing but even in *knowing* what those commandments are in every specific instance. Long ago we gave up the false prize of biblical literalism. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian and Jewish biblical scholarship has recognized the role of social and historical dynamics in the writing of the Bible. It doesn't come to us in the way that Muslim teaching says the Qur'an did, straight from the mouth of God.

So where does our guidance lie if not in a book we can refer to as the literal and authoritative word of God? Welcome to the world that Adam and Eve lived in, and we do too. This should remind us again of the need to be humble in all things.

At the very least we need to remember that we are not omniscient and so we have a tendency to make things *farpotshket*. In this sense fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom. What is unspoken but essential here is the need to get past the fear part. We will not die by God's hand. Yes, we lose our innocence. Yes, we have forfeited life in an earthly paradise. But God does not condemn us for our humanness. Fear of the Lord is only the *beginning* of wisdom, not its end. Indeed there is no end. We're always some steps short of wisdom, just as we're always short of omniscience. Reminding ourselves that we never know it all may be the fullest measure of wisdom we can ever get. And that's no small thing. Knowing that we *don't* know it all is a huge improvement on the self-deception that we *do*.

Adam and Eve are not condemned to death. They simply leave the garden of their innocence. (And God even gives them clothes for their protection.) Perhaps as they (and we) go forth into the world, their faces look a bit like Peer Gynt's at the end, with a mixture of wonder, confusion, and regret, with choice but to go on. And that's enough.