

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

THE FALL GUY

A sermon preached on February 10, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Genesis 2:15-17 [NRSV] *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." **3:1-7** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ 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.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, ¹ knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

Matthew 4:1-11 [NRSV] *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

It was long ago, and I was a freshly arrived seminary student on the near-north side of Chicago. I was unfamiliar with the neighborhood and a bit awed by the big city and its heavy traffic. I had hardly straightened my wheels after

turning at an intersection when a pair of flashing blue lights appeared in my rear-view mirror. I had turned left at a *No Left Turn* sign, the man in the blue uniform told me, and he handed me a ticket. My driver's license was surrendered as a security deposit until I paid my fine.

The Sunday following, abashed but undaunted, I loaded some classmates into my car and we set forth in search of a cheap restaurant. "There's one!" someone in the back seat shouted. I quickly pulled into the right lane, rounded the corner, and – as Yogi Berra put it – it was *deja vu* all over again – those familiar, irritating blue lights pulsing away in my rear view mirror. "Didn't you see the car you just cut off back there?" the policeman asked. "No, sir," I said. "Give me your driver's license," he demanded. "I don't have one," I confessed, "I only have this," and showed him the ticket I had received just two days earlier.

There ensued a lengthy silence. "What did you get this for?" he asked, wearily. "Turning left where I wasn't supposed to," I said. He sighed, shook his head, and handed the ticket to me, saying, "Son, you'd better go straight from now on."

Confession is good for the soul, they say, so I lay before you my sins and beg you not think too unkindly of me. I could take the spiritually weak position that it's not my fault, that I am merely the product of forces and influences beyond my control. I could be like the hapless lad who showed his father a very poor report card, said, "What do you think is wrong with me, Dad – heredity or environment?" Or, as Adam said to Cain and Abel as they walked past the Garden of Eden, "There's where your mother ate us out of house and home."

But it won't wash. We cannot have it both ways: on the one hand wanting credit for any good we do but refusing to accept blame for our mistakes on the other hand. That sin and evil are real is something we don't need scripture to teach us. Proof lies all about us. "The good that I would do, I do not, and the evil that I would not do, I do," writes the Apostle Paul... but speaking for all of us.

Today's reading from Genesis concerns what traditional Christianity has referred to as the *Fall*, sometimes elaborated as humanity's fall from grace. "Through Adam's fall, we sin-ned all," goes the old catechism couplet. But it's time to bury this unscriptural way of thinking about ourselves and God. Outside of Paul's writings, there is virtually no reference to the stories of Adam and Eve, the snake, the Garden, or any "fall" from grace elsewhere in scripture, and in one of his uses of the story, Paul argues against women being allowed to speak in church. After all, he implies, look what happened when Eve had the last word in the Garden!

In our day the Garden of Eden has become a battleground in the culture wars. Creationists, for instance, insist that Genesis is the factually reliable account of how the world came to be, and they want it taught in public schools. Nothing could be further from scripture's intentions. As Galileo said in his self-defense, "The intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes." And as John Calvin said, "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere."

As for the so-called Fall, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “Nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself.... The Old Testament does not assume such a Fall.” In fact, the books of the law, the writings of the prophets, and the teachings of Jesus all assume we are quite capable of quite the opposite, that is, doing what is righteous and just. Otherwise, what, are the commandments and the Sermon on the Mount all about?

Scripture’s view of humanity is ultimately one of optimism and hope and is rooted in the knowledge of God’s loving relation with all of creation and — especially — with the people to whom God’s son was sent. Early in the story there is a warning: eat of the tree and you will die. But, in fact, the consequence of those infants eating the fruit was not death, but, rather, life as we know it. This is what the story is about, that life moves from the blissful, naïveté of infancy to the choices and consequences of moral struggle in maturity. But, at every stage, God’s ardent desire to win our hearts remains.

These are things we need to remember when life becomes thick with ambiguity and the choices we have to make are characterized by pain. In times of honesty we can each enumerate occasions when, through ignorance, willfulness, and selfishness we have lost sight of ourselves and who we are called to be. We have each, at times, fallen far short of the expectations of our loved ones, or our colleagues, our God. The question then is whether in our falling our souls were shattered into bits impossible to reassemble, or do we fall into the hands of grace which knits back together again the frayed threads of life and relationship. Scripture is not a bill of indictment writ by a vengeful God, but a long and gracious love story where, at the end of the first chapter, God the jilted lover is not left planning our punishment, but pondering how to woo these curious children back.

Life is a mix: the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. Within us rests the power to resonate with blessing or reject it. Lying within us, side by side, like sunlight and shadow, is goodness and evil. These are choices of our freedom, the same freedom Adam and Eve exercised, exploring the border between love and communion, or alienation and despair.

It is when we take the world and its tragic problems seriously — want in the midst of plenty, morality perverted by ideology, greed pretending to be virtue and love portrayed as foolishness, violence and sexuality as entertainment, selfishness as sacrament — it is then the Genesis story assumes power and strength, indicting our short-sighted willfulness and pride, our self-centeredness and carelessness. The Bible describes a creation that has real limits. It speaks of bonds we cannot break without bringing suffering upon ourselves, those we love, and the earth itself. It tells stories about promises which are eternal, of moral quandaries and consequences, of desire, disobedience, and the determination of the God who is willing to suffer in patience the freedom of a creation still unfolding.

At the many points of inadequacy in our lives, when intelligence and cleverness and love fail us and we fall, what we fall upon is grace. Paul Ricoeur observed there are three things the heart aches to hear from someone in

authority, and once hearing, knows it belongs. Children long to hear it from parents, spouses from their partners, and humanity from God. “Don’t be afraid; it’s all right; I am here.” These words comprise scripture’s benediction. They are written in the code of creation, embossed upon the heart of Christ, and proclaimed in our worship. Hear them now, and trust.