

BIG GOD QUESTIONS

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Our story for today is a dazzling, mythical account of human origins, the encounter of crafty evil personified, and meeting Creator/Parent God. This story has been named by many “The Fall.”

The story begins in a beautiful garden named Paradise amid the rustle of giant ferns, exotic blooms, incredible fruits and vegetables and amid the soft waving of tall ornamental grasses. And then, the sound of feet making their way through the garden. God’s feet. What does God sound like? Moving through the garden, perhaps we hear the soft slap of sandals, the almost imperceptible tread of bare feet, the swish of displaced foliage.

One might imagine an excitement if you were hearing God making a pathway to you. You might want time to get ready, to prepare yourself – put your best self forward. Instead, these first two people hide as soon as they hear God. They hide so well that God seems unable to find them – and God calls out for them to show themselves. Just like a little kid playing hide and seek, the man can’t seem to help himself and calls out. “I’m here - I heard you and I was afraid. I was afraid and I hid.” The first man who we have named Adam, then dumps the blame for their naked and afraid situation on the woman. ‘She did it. She gave me the fruit and I ate it.’ And then the woman passes the blame, ‘The serpent tricked me and so I picked the fruit and ate it.’

God curses the snake – it must crawl on its belly – humans particularly women will hate it – forever, it will be a despised creature.

This is a wonderful story and yet an odd story to have been given such a place of prominence in providing the basis for so much of our Christian faith. Most likely written around 950 BCE, this story was created to offer an explanation or possible reason for the current state of the world for Yahweh followers who wondered what their faith ancestors did for them to deserve their current fate.

This mythical story encourages us to ask our own Big Questions about God and us in the grand scheme of the world. Who are we? Who is God? How does God interact with humans? What kind of relationship do we have? How does God interact with other parts of Creation? Beginning with stories like this one, we almost cannot help but formulate big questions of our own about the nature of human existence and the origins of human life.

What this story is not is historical, scientific fact. It is a fanciful, mythical beginning of creation story and it is also a story that if we are honest, can make us want to simply toss it away as nonsense and move forward into more helpful biblical and more current stories of justice making.

Throughout Christian history, this story has been used to promote and perpetuate all kinds of ideas about good and evil - ideas about the role of women and men – ideas about the nature of animal creatures – ideas about sexuality and modesty – ideas about the nature of God.

Because the basics tenants of this story are so familiar, we can think we know what and who each character symbolizes. We know, of course that the snake is the devil - Satan. The devil made me do it. Read again. The snake /serpent only told the truth – that the fruit of the tree would *not* kill the one who ate it – but would allow the eater to become aware – to gain knowledge of the world within and beyond the garden. And because the snake assures the woman of this truth and the woman picks and eats the fruit and offers the fruit to the man who also eats the fruit – the snake – the messenger - is cursed.

That is one of my first big questions. Why is the snake cursed for telling the truth? And why does God curse anyone – including the snake? Why doesn't God recognize that this first interaction is only a test – and yes – they did fail this test – however, this is strike one. Why doesn't God lovingly chastise the snake for passing on information that perhaps wasn't meant to be passed on.

And a second big question. Why has the woman been characterized throughout history as the sneaky, sly, seductor, luring the man into eating the fruit. Why haven't we recognized the courage of the woman in wanting to do whatever it takes to receive knowledge of good and evil – and the willingness to try something brand new?

And then, why wasn't it laudable to want to share that knowledge. Why isn't this woman we've named Eve known throughout history as the first courageous woman?

And another big question. Why does God pretend not to know where the man and woman are hiding? Doesn't God know everything? Or this early on in history could it be that God didn't know everything yet? Is this even the same God of steadfast, unconditional love I know – somehow, I don't think so. So, how then are there different kinds of God portrayed in the Bible stories and why is this so?

When I was in seminary, I learned the term 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. It was a style of literary interpretation in which texts are read with skepticism in order to expose their purported repressed or hidden meanings. It meant to take no scripture at face value – to read no scripture literally – to accept no scripture without digging deep into discernment and study and discussion. It allowed one to read the bible with a huge lens allowing one to discover the more-ness of God through the reading of many scriptures – as well as getting to know God through means other than scripture.

The Bible is a book filled with stories of the people of God in relationship with God and in relationship with Jesus the Christ. The Bible is not the only way we know God. For many it is not even the best way to know God.

The Wesleyan Quadrangle credited to John Wesley suggests that we know God through four key ways: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Scripture thus is only one of the ways we engage and connect with God – an important way, for sure, but only one way.

If you are like me, this is encouraging to know – particularly as you dig deeper and deeper into bible study and keep bumping into stories that challenge and make you question what is true and or good about God and our faith history – that scripture is only one aspect of how we know God – and thus these stories are not make or break – keep or throw away – for my faith.

The four parts of the Quadrangle: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience are considered to have similar value in forming and building one's faith. Thus tradition is important – biblical tradition, yes, but also the tradition that includes the history of our faith ancestors – good and bad history to guide and direct us in

our actions in current time. And traditions of faithful peoples of all religions and times. Reason – using our brains and our knowledge to use science and technology and quantum physics and the arts and humanities and the natural world to guide our thinking and our faith process. And Experience – our lived experiences and our reflecting upon those lived experiences constantly define and refine our lives of faith.

This story of the first people in the garden of Eden can stir up a lot of questions about the human /God relationship especially for those who think they have God all figured out. There are no answers here in this story – only more tantalizing questions. What this story can do, however is to encourage us to question everything about our beginnings – about God – about the world we live in – which is a very good suggestion for all people of faith. We can ask these questions with a sense of playfulness, a sense of childlike wonder, a sense of delight and exploration. These questions ought not to lead us to discard or reject our faith, but rather to enlarge and expand our understanding of the multi-faceted, multi-dimensional nature of faith. When we embrace the value of biblical suspicion and doubt, we are reminded that doubting makes us not less faithful, but deepens and expands and develops our faith – because in the process we begin to recognize that our faith is far, far bigger than any walls or boxes or book covers we can put on it.

To hear stories like this biblical story as a genuine historical account is to trivialize it beyond recognition, to deny it's depth and power and yes, its truth for us. In it are contained the very elements of our existence and our lifelong quest for understanding and enlightenment.

Growing and living in faith requires an inquiring mind, not merely a sponge. Ask questions, ask harder questions, formulate possible answers, then ask more questions and reflect with others on those questions and possible answers. Develop your hermeneutics of suspicion. Doubt the easy answers and simple responses. Seek and find answers from your own and other's experiences, from the traditions you have inherited, from the incredible reasoning of your amazing mind and other's equally amazing minds, and yes, from the scripture stories of the people of faith who came before us.