



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church

3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“Playing Hide and Seek”

II Cor. 4:13-5:1; Psalm 130; **Genesis 3:1-15**

*“...the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God....
But the Lord God called ... and said ... ‘Where are you?’”* Gen. 3:8-9

Rev. Guy D. Griffith

June 6, 2021 // 2nd Sunday after Pentecost // Proper 5

In his book on biblical characters, this is what Frederick Buechner writes about Adam:

He let the *Times* fall to the carpet beside him. It was the usual recital – a new tax plan, the danger of oral contraceptives to women over forty, the mayor’s special committee on child abuse. He posted his glasses back on his forehead and with his thumb and forefinger massages the loose flesh under his eyes. Through the club window he could see a ... woman in slacks waiting for a bus, a boy with a pony tail walking a dog. Somebody had the TV on in another room, and he could hear the rise and fall of canned laughter. He lit a cigarette and let the smoke drift out of his mouth without exhaling it. The city sky was turning brown with the approach of dusk. Then suddenly, as if it had been only yesterday, he remembered Eden.

The leopard... the starling... the rose – he remembered giving each its name, remembered the green river, the shy, green girl. He could no longer remember why it was he had felt compelled to leave it except that it had something to do with asserting his independence. Beyond that, he had only the dim sense that somehow a terrible injustice had been done, or possibly a terrible justice.

He saw the flame of what must have been the sunset flash like a sword in the upper story windows across the street. When the old steward brought him his third martini he called him Pete. Actually his name was Angelo.¹

And just to provide equal opportunity, here's the first thing Buechner writes about Eve:

Like Adam, she spent the rest of her days convincing herself that it had all worked out for the best....

It was only once in a while at night, just as she was going off to sleep with all her usual defenses down, that her mind drifted back to the days when, because there was nothing especially important to do, everything was especially important.; when too good not to be true hadn't yet turned into too good to be true; when being alone was never the same as being lonely. Then sad and beautiful dreams overtook her which she would wake up from, homesick for a home she could no longer even name....²

Homesick. Homesick for Eden. Have you ever been homesick?

Homesick is the kid on the second night of summer camp, lying in an unfamiliar cot, listening to the owls, longing for the security and protection of some place better known.

Homesick is the college junior on the first night of a study abroad, disoriented from jetlag and anxious from navigating a new country and language, wanting to be back in a setting where there are familiar faces and home-cooked food.

Homesick is the ageing couple moving yet again, but this time from their own apartment into assisted living, viewing the photo of their beautiful home and remembering all the years spent raising generations of family there.

Homesick. We know how it feels. It's the risk of stepping out beyond familiar landmarks, dependable relationships, and recognizable food. Remember back to a time when you felt it. I think we've all felt it this year as we try to define what "new normal" is. Chances are it's a glimmer of what it's like to be homesick for the Garden of Eden. Reflecting on this passage, my friend Bill Carter notes,

Most of the time that we remember Adam and Eve, we recall the forbidden fruit, the talking snake, the taking of what they were told not to take, the hiding, the blaming. But frankly, the Jews never spent much time revisiting that part of the

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 6-7

² *Ibid.*, 35.

story. They knew that they had already been expelled from Eden. Now they had to make their way in the world with the knowledge of good and evil.³

It was Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, who said that this is what makes human beings different from other animals: we have the capacity to make moral choices. And we have to make the choices, because it's no longer Eden, where all the choices were made for us.

Maybe, as some of the Jewish sages have suggested, Eden was never intended as our long-term home. After all, goes the reasoning, if God did not want us to have choices, then God would have implanted an obedience chip in our hardware. We would be good robots who colored within the lines and always did what was respectable.

Like the story Bill Moyers tells:

My mother used to leave her freshly baked sugar cookies right in the middle of the table, warm and inviting but forbidden until supper was over. If she meant the temptation to be a test of discipline, to build character, my brother and I often flunked. I think of this when I hear the story of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Why didn't God place the forbidden fruit on the very top branch, beyond the reach of innocence?⁴

The truth is we make choices all the time, sometimes by animal impulse, rather than by logic or congruity or faithfulness. Consequently, once again, we find ourselves far from home. The ancient story speaks of this. God gives us room to choose between good and evil. There is no heavenly hovering, no warning sirens when we get too close. God entrusts us with the ability to make good decisions.

And whether or not each decision is good, it comes with natural consequences. So the Lord says, "So Adam, you want to go it alone? Well, here's your hoe and there are the fields. Eve, you thought you could be fruitful by yourself? Guess what; when you get to be fruitful, childbirth will be no picnic." Up until now, she hasn't had to worry about that. Life outside of Eden is going to be a lot of hard work.

So this isn't a biology story or a science story. This is a diagnosis of our human condition. We are given great choices, in great freedom, and they come with consequences. More important than some philosophical notion of original sin as our genetic condition, there is also a residual homesickness. We have all these choices, that's what makes us human. And we also long to be united with God. That's the homesickness.

³ Bill Carter, "Longing for Eden" a sermon preached at The Presbyterian Church of Clarks Summit, Clarks Summit, PA, March 5, 2017. I am indebted to Bill for the direction and focus of the sermon and some of the illustrations used with his permission.

⁴ Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) 39

The Welsh have a wonderful word that I've known all my life: *heirith*. It has no exact translation into English, but it is like a homesickness but rolled up with grief and sadness over what's lost, especially in the context of Wales and Welsh culture. It is a "mixture of longing, yearning, nostalgia, wistfulness or an earnest desire for the Wales of the past."⁵ If you've ever read the book or seen the movie, *How Green Was My Valley* (as I did for the umpteenth time earlier this week), you've encountered *heirith*. I think that's the kind of homesickness we have for Eden.

The old poet describes the feeling well:

A feeling of sadness and longing,
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles the rain.⁶

As a boy the first week of June always marked the beginning of summer with all its shimmering glories. My boyhood home, 2911 Westminster Road – how's that for the Divine Author using foreshadowing?! – was a post-war suburban split-level built in a neighborhood around a public park. In the summer the City would hire a School teacher or graduate student to supervise the little cinder-block building where the sports equipment and ping-pong table were kept. From 9:00am – 2:00pm all the children in the neighborhood were there playing kickball on the tennis courts, baseball or basketball, sliding on the twirly- whirly sliding board, teeter-tottering, climbing the monkey bars, throwing quoits, or playing box hockey in the sheltering shade of the craft building's wide overhang. But the best game to play was hide-and-seek. Some days there were more than 50 playing; you could hide anywhere as long as it was within the boundaries of the five acre park. Those games were epic; yet the funny thing is the longer the game took, the more you wanted to be found.

But playing hide and seek with God is no game. Rather it is a sign that guilt and shame and distance have intruded into our first and fundamental relationship. "Adam, where are you?" is the central existential question of the Bible. In one his novel, *Follow Me Down*, the great southern writer, Shelby Foote, has a character named Dummy. Stranded on an island in the middle of a river he muses,

"I knew where north was. I knew where south was. I knew where east was. I knew where west was. *But where was I?*"⁷

⁵ Wikipedia 6/3/21 (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiraeth>)

⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Day is Done" from the Poetry Foundation 6/3/21 (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45896/the-day-is-done>).

⁷ Shelby Foote, *Follow Me Down*, 1950: I did not consult the text nor did I have time to look up the copyright. I read the novel years ago and this line has lived in my memory ever since as a marvelous illustration of the human condition.

Frankly, I think Adam and Eve were glad to be found. Ask anyone who has been in a twelve step group for any time and they'll tell you how grateful they are to no longer be living in the shadows.

Because right decisions take wisdom. They require clarity. They need courage. Because the only way forward is forward. If there is a longing for Eden, it is a desire to be restored and brought back to God. It's to be at peace with God, and through that, to be at peace with one another.

And there is no greater peace to stand before God guilt-free, and say, "These are the decisions that I have made. I could do no other. I own them and I offer them as the best acts of faithfulness that I can do. God, finish and heal what I cannot."

That's why the Table of Christ is such a compelling invitation for us today. It is a way station on the road to the Great Banquet, when all will be restored. When the New Jerusalem comes down for us as a gift, it will come not because we are righteous, not because we are good, but because God is better at goodness and righteousness than we can ever be.

And God is so good to stay with us, and stay after us, until that final day appears. Did you notice the end of the Garden story? I was well into my 20's before I heard what my Sunday School teachers neglected to point out. After Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, God stitches their first set of clothes. Can't go walking around out there in those stupid, little fig leaves! So God says, "Here are some real clothes." That's unexpected grace. They don't have to fend for themselves or play hide-and-seek. They are found. They are provided for.

Then the grace continues through the ages, as God keeps speaking, offering even more guidance after the very first commandment is ignored. For we do not live by bread alone, but by the Word that God still speaks.

And I'll tell you the very last words God speaks: "Welcome home."

////

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lord God, we do not ask for such wisdom as to become like you.

We ask only for the wisdom to listen for your voice,

to heed your teachings, and

to come to know the one who is your word incarnate,

Jesus Christ —

who feeds us at his table,

who nurtures us in his love and grace, and

who welcomes us home **Amen.**