

Eve

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This morning we are beginning a six-week series of sermons focusing on the stories of women in the bible.

The biblical story is very often advanced in significant ways by women.

But, as is so often the case, the stories that are most retold and the heroes most readily remembered are usually the men.

As an example, who has not heard the story of Moses heroically leading the Israelites out of the wilderness, but how many people have heard of Shiphra and Puah the midwives in the story who trick Pharaoh and save Moses' life as a baby?

Or how often do we remember the names of Jesus' earliest male followers, while forgetting that they all fled from the empty tomb leaving the women from among his group to be the first witnesses of the resurrection.

My hope in this Bible study and sermon series will be to help correct the record, to lift up a few of these stories of women in the Bible that teach us important things about the nature of God, and the life of faith. There are gems of wisdom and truth that can only be unearthed from the bible when we take a fresh look at the stories of women.

There are great examples of faith that we will miss if we do not seek out and celebrate the ways women have responded to God's call, and lived out a life of faith in the world.

And so today we will begin at the best place I could think of to begin, the story of Eve.

Eve is certainly not a forgotten or little known woman of the bible. But she may be the most misunderstood. This is in no small part because she has had heaped upon her by generations of interpretation no less than responsibility for all the sin and death of human history.

A traditional Christian interpretation of this story has been that in taking the fruit of the tree of knowledge, Eve destroyed what was otherwise a perfect world and turned it into the world we know now a world of sin and brokenness.

But it is important to notice that this traditional reading is importing a lot of theology into this primal and mythic story. A story that does not once use the word sin or the word fall.

Here is what happens.

After God has formed the first humans, God places them in a garden. And God tells them that they may eat of any tree in that garden except for the one in the very center. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God tells them that if they eat of it, they will die, that very day.

The snake is the most cunning of the creatures in the garden. And he comes to speak with Eve, he tells her that she will not die if she eats the fruit, rather, she will gain knowledge, she will become wise.

And so she takes, and eats, and shares the fruit with Adam.

And they do not die, as God had warned. But rather, as the snake said, they gain knowledge. Their eyes are opened.

I do not think that this story is in the bible to offer an explanation for why the world can be a painful and broken place.

I think this story is in the bible to show something true about our growing up, both as individuals and as a people.

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I am getting a firsthand look at some early child development these days in my house. Our daughters are 22 months and 4 months old.

When babies are first born, they do not have any sense of being separate from the parent that birthed them. They are, as far as they can tell, just parts of the same organism. This is why newborns tend to get fussy if they too far away from their parent.

Lydia, our youngest, is just now beginning to grab onto toys and small objects, just starting to hold a rattle, or a small stuffed animal, even if just for a moment. She is just beginning to figure out that there is a world beyond her, even if it is just a few inches in front of her face.

And as she grows up, there will come a day where, like our older daughter Cora, she begins to learn words to describe what she sees. She begins to learn that Mom will come back when she leaves.

And at some point she will, much to our dismay, learn the word that toddlers love to say: “no.”

It is a word that we know she will learn. Because as we grow up, we begin to learn that we can make choices, that we can help shape our world, that we are not solely at the mercy of others, but we can shape our fate.

And without fail, some day, every child says or does something that breaks their parents hearts. Words that were sharpened to wound. A door slammed in the face. The rejection of some faith or core value.

And these are real moments of painful rupture. And they are an unavoidable part of growing up.

That is why I think this story is in the bible. To express this ambiguity about growing up. Which is an inevitable and important part of human growth.

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Those early days in the garden sound very much like infancy, God is right there, there is no distance, no separation. God and the work of God’s hands. These humans. Connected in an unbreakable bond.

But before long, these creatures begin to notice a bigger world and something forbidden that she can reach out and grasp.

And she does. And humanity loses the innocence of the simple life in the garden. But gains the knowledge of both good and evil.

It is an inevitable feature of growing up, that no doubt broke God's heart. But, just in the way that watching a child grow into themselves comes with loss.

Because it also comes with incredible gain. And I would guess that very few of us would choose to remain infants forever, even if someday we might wish that we could return to such an uncomplicated existence, even for a few moments.

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The 20th century painter Edward Hopper once said, in reference to his creative work: "painting is about a vision, and then reluctantly surrendering that vision to what I have made."

There is something in the creative process that has a life of its own, and I believe that is what God experiences in making us. It is that difficult, but inevitable feeling of what you have made taking on a life of its own and slipping away.

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The wisdom in the story of Eve is that we cannot taste the greatest gifts that life has to offer without making ourselves vulnerable to life's greatest pain.

Every time we love, we open ourselves to the future of immense grief. Every time we welcome children to our family, we set ourselves up to be disappointed. Every time we accept a job with more responsibility, we expose ourselves to more prominent failure.

Seen this way, Eve's defining characteristic is not her disobedience that broke the world, but rather her courage that awakened us to the fullness of life.

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And each of us is given an opportunity to follow the example of this courage.

One way to live life is to manage risk, to expose ourselves to as little suffering and pain as possible by staying walled off from the world. Not giving ourselves fully in relationships with others, not letting our guard down and sharing the depths of our hearts with those we love.

We could give nothing away, in case we need it later.

Or we could reach for the fruit of life in all its goodness and beauty, knowing that tasting of its gifts will also mean leaving the garden of our simple security.

We could live with extravagant generosity. We could tell our story freely and without fear. We could love with abandon. Hope big hopes. Dream impossible dreams.

And we also have to take responsibility for what comes of such freedom. This season of Lent is a season of taking stock, of confessing where we have taken wrong turns, where we have failed to live up to all that God created us to be.

Because we are grown-ups now, as ambivalent as we may feel about it. We are not in the garden, we are not ignorant of good and evil.

I, for one, am grateful for that. But that doesn't mean it isn't hard.