

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
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“Eden: Trouble in Paradise”
Genesis 2:25-3:3

Today we start a series titled “Eden” that will carry us through July and into the beginning of August. Particular thanks to Pastor Mark who outlined this series. It’s a close reading of Genesis chapter 3, a fairly consequential chapter in the scope of Scripture, commonly known as The Fall, when humanity rebelled and fell away from God. For seven weeks we will go through it, bit by bit.

Now you might be thinking, that’s a long time for us to spend here and just here; that’s a long time to talk about how we fall away from God. And to that I’d offer two things. First, that this kind of series is something we’re going to try to do at least once a year, that is, really close readings of a shorter passage, just because that’s a different way to approach a text, especially if it’s a particularly pivotal one like this one, which brings up the second thing. We’re going to spend a good bit of time in this chapter of Scripture because this is one of those hinge points in the Bible. There was before and there was after, and before and after are very different. And because it sets the stage for much of the tension of God’s goodness and faithfulness in contrast with humanity’s faithlessness and fickleness, and asks, can this be mended? Can this be restored? And it of course sets the stage for just how that divide is one day mended in Christ Jesus our Lord. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

V. 25, right at the very end of chapter two says, “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” Well good for them. Takes a certain sort, I guess.

The other day, Frances and I caught ourselves daydreaming about a vacation. Probably a bit of summer blues that catches up to you every so often when you reflect on just all the things you might typically do in this time of year but now don’t, all the more because we’re about to have another baby in a few weeks. (By the way, I realized that I don’t think I’ve directly mentioned that we’re having a baby next month. I guess you don’t have as many chances to just mention things casually, and it’s not really a church announcement.) Point is, this whole time we’ve been trying to be extra careful, and we knew that this summer wouldn’t really be a summer vacation, per se, but more bringing up baby. So I guess we got to daydreaming a bit about leaving the kids with the grandparents, some time away, just the two of us.

So we started looking up things like vacation spots with words like “Couples Only” or “Adults Only,” and there are a bunch of things like that, places for those who, though they might love kids, and they might even love their kids, would prefer to have some time away without them. And that’s normal. There are plenty of spots that do just that.

But then mixed in with these “Couples Only” or “Adults Only” vacation spots were some other descriptions that made me realize, we’re in some different territory here. I won’t go into detail here, but suffice it to say, when you start seeing the phrase “clothing optional” as part of a vacation spot’s pitch to you, you know you’re in a different ballgame. And not so much what we

were looking for. For others, there's apparently a market for such a thing, and I suppose it lends itself to a certain level of comfort, shall we say.

But that is what came to mind for me when I read that first verse of our text today, the final verse of chapter two: "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." Clothing optional, not a problem for them.

It makes me wonder, what does that say about them? What does it say about them that they were naked and were not ashamed? I think it's more than just their being comfortable with their bodies or something like that, because their nakedness is something that will come back into the story later on but in a different way. I think it's speaking to who they are, and not just to who these two individuals are, but insofar as they represent humanity at large, it's speaking to who we are, or rather who we were. Because this one verse captures, in my opinion, so much of the state of humanity *before* the events of this next chapter, and therefore lifts up just what has been lost.

At this point, it might be appropriate to make a quick sidebar on a topic that can pretty quickly pop up when you read some of the opening chapters of the Bible, and that is, did this really happen? There's not really a convenient place to weave this in, but you kind of have to if you talk about the beginning of Genesis, so I'm going to try to discuss it briefly here and then jump back to the two naked people running around without a care in the world. Did this really happen? Did the fate of humanity really hinge on the actions of these two people? Were these two people really the forebears and ancestors of all the rest of us? What does that mean about when they have kids, and then their kids start having kids? Who do their kids end up having kids with, their siblings? Thrown into the mix with all of this are questions from the two chapters that came before this. If you've ever read Genesis 1 and 2, these might sound familiar. Was the universe really made in a span of seven days, roughly 6,000 years ago? What about the Big Bang? What about dinosaurs? What about the fossil record?

One day we might do a series on Genesis 1, and when we do that we'll talk about some of the ways that very smart, faithful Christians have attempted to reconcile the testimony of Scripture in these early chapters with scientific and historical evidence. If you have questions along those lines, please reach out.

For now, though, for our purposes, I would just offer this. We can choose to read these early chapters like a science or history book. We can choose to do that. And there have been many faithful Christians who have done just that, but what I promise you is this: if you read these texts primarily like a science or history book, then you will spend most of your time and reflection struggling to make it fit. That's what you'll focus on, and the real shame when that happens is that it can distract us from focusing on what the real questions are here: what does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about us? What does this tell us about God and us?

For the purposes of this series, that'll be our approach: coming to the text asking, what is the theological claim this is making? What does this tell us about God and what does this tell us about us?

So as we come back to the two naked people running around without a care in the world, what do they tell us about God, and what do they tell us about us?

Tells me this about the two of them: that they were completely exposed and yet perfectly at home. They were completely exposed and yet perfectly at home. And it wasn't like they were just at a beach resort; it was more meaningful than that. They enjoyed creation in its totality, enjoying a communion within the world, and not just with the world, but with God himself. God had made them in his image. God had formed them together. God had entrusted care of creation

to them. As we'll see later on, God walked among them. This was their existence. Not just that they were merely naked, but that they were fully exposed, fully known, and in communion with the Lord God Almighty, and they were not ashamed.

Harmony is a word that comes to mind. Wholeness is a word that comes to mind. Innocence is a word that comes to mind. Purity is a word that comes to mind. Pristine is a word that comes to mind.

But that harmony and wholeness and innocence didn't mean absolute freedom to do whatever they wanted. God had placed a degree of expectation on them; God had placed boundaries. Chief among them was a certain tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it was called. And God had said to these two people, you can enjoy any aspect of creation, the fruit of any tree, but not this one tree, not the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Challenging though that is—why would you put a tree that would kill people right in the middle of a garden, seems to be some questionable landscape choices, but don't let that distract you. The point is, everything is in right relationship, even with the boundaries. This is humanity as it should be: fully known and bare before God and yet completely welcome, in harmony with each other and with the Lord and with creation. This is how things were.

But not all was well.

A certain creature was in the garden with them: a serpent. We'll talk about him a lot more next week, but for now, note just how subtly the seeds of doubt are planted. He says in v. 1, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" He doesn't come out claiming anything? He's just asking the question. And the woman answers, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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.'"

The thing is, that's not what God said. If you went back to chapter two, don't eat the fruit, yeah he said that, but God didn't say anything about not *touching* the fruit. She added that on. What does that say?

What it says to me is that for the man and the woman both, the boundaries that God had put in place for them, the limitations God had set, were looming larger in their minds than they actually were, to the point that they were apparently ready to exaggerate the ways God was limiting them. Never mind that this tree, this tree that was off limits, was a part of a creation that was good and an existence that was harmonious. Never mind that they themselves enjoyed full communion in the world and with God and with each other and were fully exposed and yet fully welcome and at home. Never mind all that. When asked about the limits God had put in place, their response exaggerates them.

What does that say about them? What does that say about us?

I remember this random occurrence when I was in elementary school. I was going home with my friend David McNamee after school, so his mom picked us up along with his little sister Janie. His mom had to run an errand before we went to their house, so we go to wherever that was, and she says, "I'll just be a minute. Just need to pick this one thing up inside. I'll be back in two minutes. Stay in the car." The windows were rolled down halfway; we were right in front of the store; she could see us the whole time; but there was some delay, so it ended up taking about ten minutes, not two.

She comes back to the car, and the second she steps inside, Janie erupts. "You left us in here! You told us we couldn't leave! You told us we couldn't talk! We had to stay in here with nothing to eat or drink!" She exaggerated what their mom had said. Their mom didn't want to get into a thing in the parking lot, so we could all smell blood in the water, that kind of leverage in

public that—so we’re learning—a child can have, so David and I started chiming in. Pretty soon, we were going through the drive thru at McDonald’s.

What is it about boundaries, about healthy limits, that make us want to fixate on them, to the point that we make them more than they are, and to the point that we forget just how much we have been given? What are ways that you’ve fixated on how things are limited that we fail to take stock of the amazing, gracious provision of the Lord? Is that something that we do too often? Is that something that we might change? It’s something embedded within us, it seems, to focus on the negative, to focus on the limitations, and not on the grace, and in so doing lose it.

As we will see in coming weeks, that is the seed of our downfall.

But there was another man, in another garden many years later, who himself enjoyed full communion with the Lord, and when given the chance to voice his displeasure, when given the chance to air his grievances, he doesn’t. And instead he says, “Not what I will, but what you will.”

And in that act of submission, a different seed is planted. Thanks be to God, for this man is the one upon whom our hope rests.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**