

## *A Paradise Made Just for Two*

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The stories of childhood remain with us all our lives because they embody our hopes and fears. “Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp” - for we all dream of the wish that suddenly comes true. “Cinderella” - for we all dream of marrying the Prince at the ball. Okay, you did, but he later turned out to be a frog!

Now the Jews had their nation’s childhood stories too, stories told over and over again around the campfires at night. These stories expressed both the fear and the faith of a people. They weren’t taken literally any more than we would take “The Ugly Duckling” literally. And perhaps the best known of these ancient stories is about about a hapless man whose wife does what every other wife has been doing since - choosing his clothes - Adam, the only man who can truly say to his wife it was love at first sight - and Eve, the only woman who when her husband says: “There was never any other woman but you, dear” doesn’t reply “Right”!! But remember it is not a candid camera. It’s a picture story about what it means to a real human being in this world where things go wrong. And that means this. You won’t find the bones of Adam in Iraq. You won’t find the serpent in the Philadelphia Zoo, any more than you will find Donald Duck in the fountains of Central Park. The story is a *parable* about what it is like to be human. It’s a picture story.

Picture God sitting alone looking out on his brand new world. He is proud of it. Six times He announces “It is good”. Look at the mighty mountains and beautiful valleys over there, and over here “a host of golden daffodils beside the lake beneath the trees”. Look at the cuddly little creatures I’ve made. They are called pandas but also admire my mighty hunters: “Tiger, tiger burning bright/ In the forests of the night/ What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” As Joseph Addison put it: “In reason’s ear they all rejoice/ And utter forth a glorious voice/ For ever singing as they shine/ The hand that made us is divine”.

But there is one little defect. It is awfully quiet. Something is missing like a bird - without a song, like a rose - without a smell. And then it occurred to God. The greatest satisfaction comes not from perfect *things*. It comes from people even if they are not perfect.

So in the picture story God decided to make a man and He looked around for stuff to use. And there is was - mud, very good for modeling as every child knows. So He set to and made a body, then a head and instead of one big eye in the forehead he decided to make two smaller ones, but stick a nose in between so that they couldn’t keep an eye on each other. Soon it was complete, a clay doll lying in the sun. And God was greatly moved and, like a mother with her firstborn, God knelt down in the dust to cuddle it, and as the divine breath touched the eyes they began to blink and the chest moved, and it got to its feet swaying a little - “and man became a living soul.” (Gen. 2:7). That’s why in the Bible Adam is not a personal name at all. In Hebrew it is pronounced A-DAM which means mankind. So it’s a picture.

And God said: “Good. Now I am no longer lonely, but man is lonely. So I will make him a companion - rounder, softer, gentler, someone who likes chocolate, someone who finds out all the interesting gossip at parties, someone to keep him warm at night and humble during the day”. Oh yes, definitely humbler during the day.

And so God created Eve which means life. And that was a great success. Like the characters in our story man relies on woman in his emotional life. But she is very different from him so much so that sometimes she seems to be from a different planet altogether - a visitor from Venus to someone on Mars. And it can be very aggravating especially if you are trying to reason something out. Right? And yet without her he is lonely and more than a little lost, like a ship without a rudder, like a day without the sun. We men don’t do well on our own.

And it should all stop there. But it doesn’t. The story goes on to relate how innocence gives way to experience, endeavor leads to failure and paradise doesn’t last. An angel with a flaming sword slams the gate shut and there is no way back (Gen. 3:24).

Now like all great stories the story of the Garden of Eden has many different levels. On one level it is answering simple questions like “Why do I have to wear clothes - or why is work such a hassle - or why are sex and shame so woven together?” Some scholars say it is really about immortality and still others say it is crucially about original sin - though the Jews who first told the story had no theory of original sin at all - and in any case original sin isn’t very original! But allow me this morning to mention two other themes in the story.

You will remember that Adam and Eve hear two voices in the garden - the voice of the serpent and the voice of God and they have to make a choice about which to follow. The story of the Garden of Eden about the choices we human beings always have to make for ourselves. You see we are not One Self. We are many selves each clamoring to be heard.

One self wants to play the organ like Ken Lovett while another wants to be able to act like Daniel Day Lewis. One wants to play golf like Rory McIlroy while another wants to be a great chef like Jamie Oliver. One self wants to change the world, while another self within wants to have a nice cup of tea at the end of a tranquil day and catch up with Mr. Selfridge. Life for all of us has too many possibilities, too many choices to make. Could it be that this story is God's reminder to us that the good life consists in deciding what choices to ignore and which delectable fruits to leave untouched? Are we greedily grasping or gratefully savoring?

Like poor motherless Eve we all make false choices in life. We lose our way and lie down at night with sorrow until sleep mercifully descends: "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased/Pluck from memory a rooted sorrow?" There is not one of us here who has not known the regret and guilt which followed the wrong choice. So that leads into the second theme - loss.

I find it comforting that the first great story in the Bible is not about Superman or an Old Testament hero. It's about two ordinary people who experience loss. All human life begins with loss. Little wonder our very first action in the world is to cry, and however wonderful the adventure of living will be - and it will be a great adventure - the tears will never be far away. Some of you will remember the Simon and Garfunkel song which says it is only "a *rock* that feels no pain, and an *island* that never cries". To begin living at all is to lose the comfort of the womb, to try to stand up even when it means we will inevitably fall down, to leave childhood's surroundings for school and tread those long daunting corridors. Perhaps even one wonderful day to walk down the aisle away from the safety of the home we've known and the family that cradled us to risk a new house and another's care. Life is risk.

Make no mistake about it. Life is certainly good - and yet living that life involves many losses. Adam and Eve are not the first couple. They are the typical couple. They start the journey with such high hopes and impossible expectations. They encounter situations they are not able to control, family relationships are incredibly stressed and they blunder in the business of living. We all start off as total amateurs.

Life's losses are many. The loss of youth with its dreams. The loss of relationships that were meant to last forever. The loss of a job. The loss of someone who was to us 'the morning star'. The loss of being needed. The loss of health and finally the loss of life itself.

But here it the wonderful thing in this story. When Adam and Eve have seen Paradise slip away; when they must face the rest of life carrying guilt and regret this infinitely gracious God steps forward to care for them. Listen to this: "*And the Lord God made garments for the man and for his wife, and he clothed them*" (Gen. 3:21).

God doesn't leave us naked before the elements. He throws away the pathetic fig leaves sewn together and makes gracious garments for the man and his wife. They are going to be okay. When the losses well up within us, he gives us friends who know how to speak the words that heal life's sorrows, the patient presence that keeps the heart from breaking, and the touch that wipes away the tears. Those are some of the garments of grace, the *outer* clothes with which we can face the world again.

But in the story God also gives us another promise. It brings *inner* healing. It's the promise of a Savior. Despite what the church has often claimed he wasn't superman. He too knew sorrow and sadness. He cried when a friend died. But he told the world a truth which it has never entirely forgotten, namely that we have a God who does not hold up our sins against us, but holds us up against our sins. Whether you believe a lot or don't believe very much that is the God who is with you on your journey. And all is well.

This morning we have thought of the first story of human life in sacred scripture. Let me tell you about another. It is the oldest bit of scripture known to man. It is 700 years older than the next oldest fragment we have - the Dead Sea Scrolls. It comes from a family grave found in the valley of Gehinnon, the valley where the pagans sacrificed their children, the valley which in Judaism stands for the word Hell, Gehenna the opposite of paradise.

When the archaeologists cleared away the pieces of pottery and debris they found two tiny amulets in the form of silver scrolls just a few inches long. Encrusted with dirt and corrosion. Probably worn by a child. The amulets had been rolled shut for nearly 3000 years. With painstaking care they slowly opened them and inside they found a barely legible inscription. It reads: "May God bless you and keep you. May God cause his countenance to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May God turn his countenance upon you, and grant you peace".

A blessing of peace in a world where so much has gone wrong - in a garden, in a valley, on a green hill outside a city wall. And whatever has ever gone wrong in your life I give you that blessing - and that peace today. Amen.