

The First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2021
Lenten Lessons from the Garden
Part One: The Garden of Original Blessing
A Sermon Based on Genesis 2:4-10, 15-25
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin



Jan Brueghel the Elder, Peter Paul Rubens
The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man, c. 1615

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Listen with an open mind and heart to what is considered to be the second account of the creation story from Genesis 2:4-10,15-25 in the Complete Jewish Bible:

⁴Here is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created. On the day when ADONAI, God, made earth and heaven, ⁵there was as yet no wild bush on the earth, and no wild plant had as yet sprung up; for ADONAI, God, had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no one to cultivate the ground. ⁶Rather, a mist went up from the earth which watered the entire surface of the ground. ⁷Then ADONAI, God, formed a person [Adam] from the dust of the ground [adamah] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so that he became a living being. ⁸ADONAI, God, planted a garden toward the east, in ‘Eden, and there he put the person whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground ADONAI, God, caused to grow every tree pleasing in appearance and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰A river went out of ‘Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided into four streams. ... ¹⁵ADONAI, God, took the person and put him in the garden of ‘Eden to cultivate and care for it. ¹⁶ADONAI, God, gave the person this order: “You may freely eat from every tree in the garden ¹⁷except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You are not to eat from it, because on the day that you eat from it, it will become certain that you will die.”

¹⁸ADONAI, God, said, “It isn’t good that the person should be alone. I will make for him a companion suitable for helping him.” ¹⁹So from the ground ADONAI, God, formed every wild animal and every bird that flies in the air, and he brought them to the person to see what he would call them. Whatever the person would call each living creature, that was to be its name. ²⁰So the person gave names to all the livestock, to the birds in the air and to every wild animal. But for Adam there was not found a companion suitable for helping him.

²¹Then God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the person; and while he was sleeping, he took one of his ribs and closed up the place from which he took it with flesh. ²²The rib which ADONAI, God, had taken from the person, he made a woman-person; and he brought her to the man-person. ²³The man-person said, “At last! This is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She is to be called Woman [ishah], because she was taken out of Man [ish].” ²⁴This is why a man is to leave his father and mother and stick with his wife, and they are to be one flesh. ²⁵They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed.

Once upon a time beyond time and a space beyond space, God was all that existed. From the deepest part of God's being was a longing to create a universe, including what we know as our home: planet earth. Edward Hays thinks of God as "the primal cosmic artist, the Creator. For five days the Cosmic Artist, with great imagination artistically created the sun, moon, and stars, then birds, fish, and animals" (Edward Hays, *A Book of Wonders*, pp. 63). Such astonishing marvels were created: our solar system, the sun, moon, stars, oceans, humpback whales that sing, the sky, birds of every shade of the colors of the rainbow, the earth, giraffes whose necks stretch into the air, penguins who waddle around looking like they are wearing little tuxedos, donkeys to transport people's wares, dogs to be human's best friends, mountains, lakes, oceans, waterfalls, forests, plains, glaciers to provide fresh water. The list goes on and on. When God was done, God stood back, smiled, and stated: "It is good!" The Hebrew word for good is "tov." "It is tov!" exclaimed God.

But, as God continued to contemplate the world, God had an uneasy, empty feeling that something just wasn't right. There still was something missing in the midst of all the glorious abundance. While all that flowed from the creative heart of God was good, it still lacked something that bore the stamp of God's own essential image. As Barbara Brown Taylor described it: "Everything God made was interesting and gorgeous. It all fit together really well, only there was nothing in this world that looked like God, exactly. It was as if God painted this huge masterpiece and then forgot to sign it. So God got busy making the signature piece, something made in God's own image, so that anyone who looked at it would know who the artist was" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, p. 32).

To create God's signature piece, God took some dust from the ground [**adamah**] and formed it into a person [**adam**], breathing life into Adam. In the ancient Irish creation story from the Christian Celtic tradition (which we will be the focus of our Lenten study), "Adam is made not only from the dust of the earth, but from seven different components: earth, sea, sun, clouds, wind, stones, and the light of the world. These correspond, in the same order, to: his body, blood, countenance, thoughts, breath, bones and soul (also connected to the Holy Spirit, or the divine image within us)." (David Cole, *Celtic Lent*, p. 10.) It's also fascinating to learn that some of the differences between individuals can be explained by which of these elements is dominant in them.

Interestingly, just as God felt something was missing and thus created Adam, Adam too was lonely for a being created in Adam's image. Thus, God formed Eve from Adam's rib to be Adam's soul mate. To see the complementary relation between them note that Adam as the man-person is termed "ish" and Eve as woman-person is termed "ishah" because she was created from "ish." God created a man-person and woman-person, Adam and Eve, in God's original image. They received a very special place on earth to live when God created a beautiful garden named Eden to live in. One imagines it with lush green vegetation, fragrant flowers, trees with every kind of fruit and nuts, and a river that irrigated the garden, which subsequently branched out in four streams. To get a sense of what the Garden of Eden must have been like, picture in your mind's eye the most beautiful scene you can imagine as you hear the Psalmist offer this applause: "***let all the rivers clap their hands and the mountains shout for joy!***" (Ps. 98:7,8)

The man-person and woman-person, Adam and Eve [Ish and Ishah], lived in this Garden of Eden. Eden means paradise. Paradise was a place where there was no fear or shame. Nothing was broken. Everything was whole. Paradise, Eden, was a place where you could walk around naked and not be embarrassed. This is summarized in our scripture when it says that "***They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed***" (Gen 2:25). I believe that they were not just physically naked but emotionally and spiritually naked. They were completely open, transparent, and vulnerable. They were not afraid or embarrassed because they felt emotionally accepted and unconditionally loved for just who and what they were. They were not self-conscious. They lived in a state of innocence.

Adam and Eve were the apple of God's eyes, who lived in the protective shadow of God's wings (Ps 17:7-8). God absolutely adored and cherished Adam and Eve. Indeed, after God created them, God not only said that they were "tov" or good, as the rest of creation was, but "tov me-od" or very good! With these words they and we are given God's Original Blessing! In the evenings, God walked with Adam and Eve in the refreshing cool of the garden and spoke to them face to face. God told them that they could enjoy every single thing that God had placed in that garden except the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is symbolized in art as an apple. Eating of this symbolic apple would thrust them from the unitive consciousness in which they were connected to God and could only choose the good to a dualistic self-consciousness providing them with free will and the ability to choose both good and evil. There was something in both of them that longed for this kind of consciousness. Adam and Eve therefore disobeyed God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thereby achieving self-consciousness, the powers of rational thinking, discernment,

and free will. Because of this they no longer could live in the secluded, safe, secure innocence of the Garden of Eden but were sent out on an adventure into the wild unknown of the larger world. We continue this adventure today.

We refer to this removal from the Garden of Eden in Christian theology as the “fall” or as “Original Sin” or what sometimes is called “Original Guilt.” Original Sin is the doctrine that because of Adam and Eve’s original sin when they disobeyed God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, all human life would be born into sin. Human beings are inherently bad. Now, and this is so important, did you know that the words “the fall” or “Original Sin” are not found in any of the writings of the Old Testament / Hebrew Scriptures? “The concept of original sin is completely alien to Jewish tradition” (Elie Wiesel). And, as a Jew, it was alien to Jesus and he even challenged theories that were similar (John 9:3). Were you aware that there was no doctrine of Original Sin until the fourth century C.E. when Augustine of Hippo developed this idea late in life? But this was not even a major theological emphasis of Augustine. It was more like a footnote, an afterthought (Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 48). Unfortunately, Western theology took this minor point and made it into a starting point for its thought. This doctrine still is rejected by the Eastern Church.

It seems that folks have forgotten that before there was Original Sin, there was Original Blessing! To remember this, we need to go back to the Garden of Eden where God created us in God’s own image. God breathed God’s breath within us and keeps breathing that into us every second of our lives. After creating us, God’s first words to us are the same as they were to Adam and Eve: You are Tov Me-od! You are not just good but very, very good! Therefore, we are not inherently bad; we are inherently good. Whereas Original Sin originates from a place of pessimism, Original Blessing originates from a place of optimistic hopefulness.

Original Sin says, “You are a sinner.” Original Blessing says “you are a winner”! This is a message we should wholeheartedly embrace. The brilliant and deeply spiritual Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong has said that: “If you as a parent, were to tell your child how bad, sinful, evil, and rotten he or she is every day of his or her life, you would create a dysfunctional child. If as a parent you were to tell your child how wonderful, incredible, and good he or she is, you would most likely create a healthy child. For the past two thousand years, the church has been creating dysfunctional people with its overemphasis on sin theology. It is time we start creating healthy people in our churches.” I agree! And we can do that by stressing the Original Blessing—the divine

proclamation that we are Tov Me’od—that was given to each of us in the garden of innocence we were born into and carry with us as we venture out into the wonderful and exhilarating wildness of the larger world. While today’s scripture about the Garden of Eden does show that we fail at times, it also tells us that we survive. For Adam and Eve did survive the loss of paradise. Although the security of the Garden of Eden was no longer their home, they were still created in the image of God; they still had within them the very breath of God; they still maintained their original blessing that never could be taken away. They and we are all on a journey back to the garden!

So how about we do something radically different this Lenten season? How about instead of focusing on Original Sin, we instead remember our Original Blessing! How about if we affirm and live into the message given to us by that same voice from heaven speaking to Jesus at his baptism that says to us “*You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased!*” Let us daily reclaim the words that were spoken when symbolic ashes were placed on our foreheads during our Ash Wednesday service a few days ago that said: “*Earth to earth [adamah], ashes to ashes, dust to dust. While from earth we come and to earth we will return, in this life and the next you are God’s beloved child and nothing will ever be able to separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ.*”

Today I would like to suggest two spiritual disciplines to help us to remember our essential goodness and the Original Blessing given to us by the God who created and called each of us into being.

#1: The Spiritual Practice of Wearing Skin or Incarnation

This practice and the next come partly from Barbara Brown Taylor’s insightful and inspirational book, *An Altar in the World*. First, in solidarity with our ancient ancestors Adam and Eve and everyone who has ever lived or ever will live, let us consider the spiritual practice of wearing our skin with pride. We came into the world with our souls wrapped in bodies covered by skin. Our souls / spirits are tucked away in marvelous houses. The fancy theological term for this teaching that we are embodied souls is “incarnation.” This is the doctrine that says that God loves bodies. In fact, listen to these beautiful words from Psalm 139:13-14 where we learn that God knit you together in your mother’s womb to be a one-of-a-kind masterpiece: “***For you fashioned my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I thank you because I am awesomely made, wonderfully; your works are wonders — I know this very well.***”

Even more astonishing, God loves bodies so much that God later also wore skin. Remember those incredible words right at the beginning of the Gospel of John that go:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ... ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh [wore skin] and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3,14)

Wow! The incredible mystery and blessing of incarnation and wearing skin! And God told us that these bodies that God covered with skin were Tov Me-od. Not just good but very good! Our Christian tradition absolutely honors flesh and blood. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. For further proof, read the Song of Songs (which we also will look at in this sermon series). Some Christian thinkers and traditions, however, have distorted this original message. There are also so many messages from the secular world and popular culture telling us (especially women, but men as well) that our bodies are bad or imperfect. We live with a sense of shame. Let's work toward defying those harmful messages, especially for our sons and our daughters. Let's rejoice in the goodness of wearing skin or being incarnated souls!

This week I encourage you to honor your Original Blessing by trying this spiritual practice: stand naked in front of a full-length mirror. Try not to criticize the way you look by saying things like "I'm too thin, too fat, too wrinkly, too hairy, too droopy, too flabby, too stooped." Don't focus on your pimples or that crooked spine that may have changed your appearance, or your beer belly, or the scar from your c-section or knee- or hip replacement surgery. Instead, wear your skin with pride and say: I have the privilege of living in this amazing body. I am so grateful, dear body, that you have helped me make it through life this far. I both am and look Tov Me-od! And then get dressed and go out into the day with a smile on your face and a bounce to your step, standing tall with your shoulders back not wearing your skin with shame or loathing but rather with pride!

#2: The Spiritual Practice of Walking Barefoot on the Earth or Being Grounded.

All the great faith traditions have spiritual practices that include some form of walking: processions, pilgrimages to places like Jerusalem or the Camino de Santiago path of St. James, labyrinths, prayer walking, or walking meditation. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about "the practice of walking on the earth or groundedness" (*Altar in the World*, pp. 53-68). Edward Hays calls it "Barefoot Reverence" (*The Book of Wonders: Daily*

Reflections for Awakened Living, pp. 381-382). Walking meditation has been popularized by the incredible Vietnamese Buddhist monk named Thích Nhát Hạnh and adopted by many Christians (*The Long Road Turns To Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation*).

Before I had plantar fasciitis, I used to enjoy participating with others in a spiritual exercise known as mindful walking at St. Mary's Retreat Center in Tennessee. We would all take off our shoes, feel the earth underneath us, and slowly and mindfully first place our bare heels over the earth, coming down ever so slowly, followed by the arch, and finally the toes beginning with the small ones and ending with the big toe. Then we would begin the process all over again with the other foot, slowly, mindfully, totally relaxed with a gentle smile on our faces as we were aware of our sacred connection to the earth. Those who had mobility issues or were in wheelchairs could participate vicariously. If we were having trouble walking mindfully and feeling our connection with the earth, we would be reminded of Thích Nhát Hạnh saying: "Visualize a tiger walking slowly, and you will find that your steps become as majestic as his" (*The Long Road Turns to Joy*, p. 49). And I would add to this, as you visualize yourself walking barefoot like a tiger, and grounding yourself onto the holy sacred earth, say to yourself that you are not just Tov, but Tov Me'od, very, very good.

With this practice we not only heal ourselves but we also heal the earth as we experience ourselves as back in the garden of our original blessing, for as Thích Nhát Hạnh says: "Walking mindfully on the Earth can restore our peace and harmony, and it can restore the Earth's peace and harmony as well. We are children of the Earth. We rely on her for our happiness, and she relies on us also. Whether the Earth is beautiful, fresh, and green, or arid and parched depends on our way of walking. When we practice walking meditation beautifully, we massage the Earth with our feet and plant seeds of joy and happiness with each step. Our Mother will heal us, and we will heal her. (*The Long Road Turns to Joy*, p. 15)

Closing Prayer: We thank you God for the Original Blessing you gave each of us, for the goodness of creation, our bodies, our lives. May we take this teaching with us as we journey with Jesus, who came to earth wearing skin and walked everywhere he went, as we travel for forty days to the cross. In the name of Jesus, whom you proclaimed your Beloved Son in whom you were well pleased. Amen.