

Eve:
Helpmate, Mother and Unsealer of the Forbidden Tree
Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-25

I have the privilege of concluding our sermon theme “Bearing Light: Women in Scripture”. As a woman and a Christian and a Bible lover, I thirst for more evidence of women’s activities and voices in the scriptures. I am grateful to the preachers who have brought us these important stories that were sometimes unfamiliar, sometimes surprising and sometimes brief, like Phoebe, who only gets one sentence in the Bible. We met women who resisted injustice, and who were clever, loyal, faithful, courageous and showed leadership within patriarchal systems. So, thank you Michele, Peter, other Pieter, Alicia, Richard and Alison for bringing these women to life for us over the past number of weeks.

To conclude this series this morning, we’ll be taking a look at the first biblical woman, Eve. Other than Mary, she is probably the most written about woman in the Bible. But unlike Mary, she gets a lot of hate mail.

Our scripture readings are about the two distinct creation accounts in Genesis, particularly the parts when human beings are created. Most modern scholars agree that these two accounts were written by different sources hundreds of years apart (confusingly the first chapter being written hundreds of years *after* the second chapter). Part of the reason for this hypothesis is that the structure of these 2 stories differs significantly. Genesis 1 includes a detailed account of the 6 days of creation with God resting on the 7th day. And Genesis 2 includes a short, presumably one-day creation extravaganza. And the way each account describes the creation of human beings also differs significantly.

In Genesis 1:27, it says that “God created humankind in God’s own image, male and female God created them”. There is no separate creation of man and woman. They are created at the same time. In Genesis 2, God apparently creates man first out of dirt and then woman is created out of the man’s side to keep him company and provide him with help. Then the serpent enters the picture, enticing the woman to disobey God’s order not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After she tastes this fruit, she gives the fruit to the man, who also eats and they both receive God’s judgment with its subsequent consequences for future generations. And they both have to start wearing clothes.

History has not been kind to Eve. The early church fathers wrote vicious things about her that they then projected onto all women. Second century writer Tertullian

issued a warning to Christian women to dress modestly lest the men in their company be tempted to sin. He writes: “Do you know that you are [each] an Eve? You are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On [your] account...even the Son of God had to die.”¹ And this is one of the tamer rants about Eve.

In Christianity, Eve is blamed for introducing original sin into the world thereby cursing humanity with death. Original sin means that we are all born with the propensity for sin because of Eve’s first sin. (It’s interesting that in the Qur’an, both Adam and Eve repent for their respective sins and God forgives them and their sin is not inherited by future generations. In other words, in Islam, there is no concept of original sin, so Eve does not bear this burden. Each person is responsible for his or her own actions before God.)

In Catholicism, Mary is called “the new Eve” and Jesus is called “the new Adam”. Mary and Jesus are both conceived immaculately, which means they are conceived without a sexual act. This is crucial because, according to the logic of original sin, it is through sex that sin is passed down from generation to generation. So, while death was introduced to the world through Eve’s sin, the possibility of eternal life now comes through Mary.

Let’s go back to our two biblical creation accounts and look more closely at what was going on for Eve.

Let’s start with the name “Adam” which comes from the Hebrew word *‘adham*. According to biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, this word has been widely mistranslated. It does not mean “man”. It means “humankind”. It means “everyone”. And *‘adham* comes from the word *adamah*, meaning earth or dirt.² Genesis 2:7 says that God formed *‘adham* from the dust of the ground and breathed life into their nostrils.

So, there is no man and there is no woman. There is only human. The idea that man was at first alone wandering around without a companion has contributed to a theology of patriarchal power that isn’t particularly biblical.

Genesis 1 describes a series of creation events that seem to culminate or peak with the creation of human beings, giving us a sense that we are separate from and

¹ “On the Apparel of Women” <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>

² Phyllis Trible, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation” in in Journal for the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 41, No 1. (March, 1973), 35-36.

superior to everything created before us. Christians have debated for a long time over our theology of creation care. Are we to have dominion over creation, enslaving creation, and doing with creation whatever we want? Or are we to be stewards and gardeners, caring for the creation of which we are a part?

Let's say for a moment that we follow the logic of dominion. God created everything in order of importance, ending with God's most important creation, man. But wait! If we follow this hierarchical reasoning which saves the best until last, then woman is God's final, culminating act of creation because God creates woman last. According to this way of thinking, Adam would take second place in terms of any hierarchy of creation. But this doesn't sit well with us. We want to think of all genders as equal in God's eyes. The logic of dominion sets human beings up for the power struggles that characterize sin – sin against one another and sin against the creation of which we are a part.

The logic of dominion also twists the way we understand Genesis 2 when it says that woman is created to be man's "helper". This has led to the idea that women are the servants of men, subordinate to men and created to provide men with support as they rise to greatness. But this would be a misunderstanding of the term "helper", just as "man" is a misunderstanding of the word *'adham*.

The Hebrew word for helper in this scriptural context is *'ezer*. In this preaching series, many of us have relied on the work of Professor of Hebrew Bible, Wilda C. Gafney. She explains that the word *'ezer* or "helper" is misleading in English translations because, in English, "a helper is often of lower status than the one being helped." Gafney says that *'ezer* in biblical Hebrew means something closer to "mighty-helper", a term that is often used in reference to God and "the divine help God renders".³ For example, Psalm 54:4 says, "God is my helper. God is the one who sustains my soul." And Hebrews 13:5-6 says, "God is my helper; I will not fear; what can anyone do to me?" There are more verses like this, but you get the idea.

In reference to Eve, Gafney says that the term *'ezer* is a "relational term...[and] does not imply inferiority."⁴ Just pause for a moment to think about the power dynamic between a helper and one who is being helped. Who has power? Who has vulnerability? Why not think in non-hierarchical terms and say that according to

³ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*

the created order, the order that God deems “good”, there is meant to be mutuality of care and aid between Adam and Eve. After all, they did emerge from the same being⁵ before God split the *‘adham*.

In Genesis 3, we have an account of what has come to be known as The Fall. It starts with an extraordinary encounter between Eve and the serpent. Eve appears to have Harry Potter-like qualities, being perhaps the first parseltongue – someone who can speak the language of snakes. Adam, on the other hand, does not appear to be gifted with this quality, since there is no occasion when we witness Adam speaking directly with the serpent.

Martin Luther thought that Eve was prone to deception in a way that Adam would not have been. Luther calls her “simple” and “weak” and that she should have deferred the conversation with the serpent to her intellectually superior husband.⁶

But we can also see Eve as both smart and wilfully disobedient, engaging in a philosophical conversation with the serpent about the ethics of eating or not eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge. In contrast, Adam does not “theologize” with the serpent or with his wife on the pros and cons of eating from the tree. Adam does not appear to hesitate or show reluctance when his wife gives him the fruit. All we know from the text is that he is a seemingly submissive recipient. Wouldn’t it be great if we could read about the conversation that might have happened between Eve and Adam? Did Adam just go with the flow without question? Was there a heated debate? Or did Eve secretly slip the forbidden fruit into an otherwise kosher fruit salad?

Whatever the case, this part of the story shows that Eve is neither passive nor subservient. She has enough power and enough freedom to sin and be held accountable. She is a full human in this respect. She weighs the options, takes initiative and makes a decision, and it is one that defies God’s will. And this is when God’s good creation takes a turn.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay out God’s creative process as one of separation and differentiation. God orders things and brings them into focus, drawing boundaries between things – between water and earth and a variety of living species, including human beings. And, in the beginning, this separation does not lead to alienation, but towards harmony and intimacy between things. Theologian Cornelius

⁵ Tribble, 36.

⁶ Martin Luther, WA (Weimarer Ausgabe) 24. 83-83; WA 9.334.

Plantinga calls this a process of “separation and binding together”.⁷ God divides ‘*adham*’ into two so that they would not “be alone” (Genesis 2:18).

But in Genesis 3, after the woman and man have disobeyed God, they hide from God in shame *and* cover their bodies out of shame. This hiding and covering are signs of a different sort of separation. Not a separation for the sake of intimacy and binding together as God intended, but a separation in the form of alienation and violence. After the fall, the created order becomes a distorted version of itself. Adam and Eve, who once saw the world and their place in it clearly, now look into a warped mirror.

We see evidence of this in the warping of the relationship between Adam and Eve. It says in Genesis 3:16 that after Adam and Eve disobey God, “man will rule over woman.” Ouch.

What do we do with this? Phyllis Tribble argues that “this statement [that man will rule over woman] is not license for male supremacy, but rather it is a condemnation of that very pattern. Subjugation and supremacy are perversions of creation.”⁸ Man and woman, then, have become part of a corrupted system, a system of alienation and domination that extends to a mistreatment of the rest of creation as well.

As a meat lover, I hate to admit this, but eating animals appears to be another sign of a corrupted creation. In Genesis 1:29, God says to ‘*adham*’, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.” No mention of animals being given to humans for food.

Is this corruption our destiny? Do we simply submit to the fate of a concept like original sin? The rest of scripture says a resounding “no”. After Eve and Adam disobey God, God does not throw creation back into the abyss and start again. God moves on and works with what is. The Bible attests to this – from the covenant God makes with Israel after The Fall and the numerous chances God gives to the people of Israel to God’s excessively forgiving love embodied in the person of Jesus.

And what can we do in response to this grace and to the many chances we are given as we continue to disobey and hide in shame?

⁷ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 29.

⁸ Tribble, 41.

I recognize the irony in concluding my sermon and this series with the thoughts of a man, but in the spirit of reconciliation between the sexes, I will do so.

In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, theologian Miroslav Volf says that “God [receives a] hostile humanity into divine communion...[and] this is a model for how human beings should relate to the other.” As humans living in a world that is simultaneously created good and has fallen into corruption, Volf believes that we can become reconciled to God and to one another through “repentance, forgiveness, making space for the other, and healing [our painful memories]”.⁹ He grounds his theology of embrace in his own very personal experience as a Croatian, nursing deep wounds from the Yugoslav Wars which pitted various ethnic groups against one another and eventually led to the fracturing of their country at the end of the 20th century.

Volf reminds us that God’s covenant is eternal even though we may sometimes keep our promises or break them, find ourselves with enemies as well as friends, and experience both intimacy with and alienation from God. Ultimately, God is “[unable] to give up the covenant partner who has broken the covenant,”¹⁰ which makes all things possible. Lord have mercy and praise be to God.

⁹Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 100.

¹⁰¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.