

Sermon: Binding the Strong Man

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:20-35**

The lectionary gave us two powerful readings today. Both are intricately constructed stories that are each part of a larger narrative. The Gospel reading even starts out in the middle of a sentence. Context is always important and today is no different, so we'll take a look at how we got here before we try to see where we're going.

The Genesis reading is part of what scholars call the Biblical Primeval History. This particular passage is sometimes called The Fall, and it's foundational to our shared cultural heritage. What that means is, we all have some idea of the snake and the apple and Adam and Eve getting in trouble with God and so forth, but we very rarely actually read the story and try to puzzle out its larger meaning.

Firstly, no one ever said it was an apple; it's just fruit from the tree, a very special tree, whose fruit no one was ever supposed to eat – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If the man and the woman had only obeyed God, none of what follows in the Bible would ever have happened. They had one thing to do, and they blew it.

We pick up the story after they did what they did, meaning we've missed a few details, but the focus of our story is on how everyone involved reacts to what was done.

Genesis tells us that the serpent is one of God's created animals (2:19). It is *not* the symbol of demonic power or of Satan. The serpent is simply a little more subtle than the other animals (3:3). We need to be more aware of what the serpent *said* than of what it is. The serpent never says another word though and then disappears from the story.

Even though the serpent tricked the woman, she knew. And she knew when she got the man involved. Maybe she didn't want to carry the shame and blame alone. The man then tried to implicate God, saying, "The woman *whom you gave to be with me*, she gave me fruit from the tree," as if God's creating the woman caused the man to sin.

So, the man knew too.

In the end, trust was broken.

In Mark's Gospel, things are taking a bad turn for the scribes. Who to blame, they wonder? Then along came Jesus, casting out demons.

He has had a busy time in chapter three. First, he was in the synagogue on the Sabbath, where he healed a man with a withered hand. And that's when the Pharisees went out and began to conspire against him. Then he and his disciples went to the sea. The crowd followed, forcing Jesus to get into a boat to avoid being crushed. Then he went up the mountain, where he appointed the Twelve and called them apostles.

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again.

There's a lot of commotion in this story. A boisterous crowd, his family trying to rescue him, thinking that he had either gone too far or had actually lost his mind, and the scribes, calling him possessed and trying to press charges against him.

And what does Jesus do? He flips the charges against him back onto the scribes.

So, that's the situation: blame in the Garden and blame and confusion about Jesus and what he was up to.

The lesson learned in the Garden – too late for the man and woman – is that we can't remain hidden from God. Shame tries to conceal. Fear drives us away from God, and fear is the sign of a disordered relationship.

One scholar, Gerhard von Rad, called fear and shame 'the incurable stigmata of the Fall in man.'¹ Assigning blame seems to only cause pain and trouble. And it all started because the man and woman failed to do the will of God.

Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). He doesn't mention his father, of course, but he does describe a new kinship model based on obedience to God alone and on following God's will.

So, what is God's will? Obviously, the man and woman in the Garden didn't know, or they did and ignored it. The people crowding around Jesus – did they know God's will, or were they there trying to learn what it was? The scribes thought they knew, because it's their job, but Jesus made it a point to let them know he was there to enter their house and plunder their goods. He pretty much admitted that his mission amounted to criminal breaking & entering. That probably didn't sit well with the scribes.

Barbara Brown Taylor warned us to “Beware those who claim to know the will of God and are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God’s will from their own.”

In every age, when the ruling class feels threatened, they try to neutralize their opponents by identifying them with the current archenemy. In the 1940s, the Nazis demonized Jews. In the 1950s, American scribes might have called Jesus a communist. In Mark, it’s scribes-versus-demons.

The scribes believed themselves to be God’s representatives so therefore, Jesus must be working with Satan, if he wasn’t Satan himself. We would never fall for this today. Clearly, the scribes are aligned against God’s purposes. They are held captive to the way things are, resisting criticism and change and, ultimately, they hide themselves from God and God’s grace.

So, again, what is God’s will? Naturally, I asked the internet exactly that question, and it returned exactly 2,260,000,000 results. No one has time for that. We need to find another way.

We can always ask Scripture. The answer is in at least two places. First, the prophet Micah wrote,

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to *do justice*, and to *love kindness*,
and to *walk humbly* with your God? (Micah 6:8)

And Jesus later taught us that the greatest two commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. The two go together and they are not optional.

Scripture also tells us that God seeks us out, to build and maintain an ongoing relationship. Our past sins don’t matter as long as we come to God in all sincerity and ready to make the effort.

Jesus said that people will be forgiven for their sins – *unless* one blasphemes against the Holy Spirit – but is that true even for the man and woman in the Garden? Scripture doesn’t tell us if they ever reconciled with God, but many people did and do. All the time. It’s never too late.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could walk in the Garden with the LORD God 'at the time of the evening breeze' or, more accurately, 'in the cool of the day?' That sounds like Paradise. No war, no commotion, no places to be, just a quiet walk with God.

Even though we are on this side of Eden, God still dwells among us. We have an open invitation to join with God every time we come to the Table in fellowship and in peace. And after that, it might be time to go for a walk.

Amen.

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¹ Rad, Gerhard von. *Genesis: a Commentary*, 91. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973.