

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

November 4, 2007

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

The Text: Genesis 3: 14-25

The Title: Pilferer or Pilgrim?

8:30 and 10:30 am, Holy Communion

The Text:

14 The LORD God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your
head,
and you shall bruise his heel."

16 To the woman he said,
"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your
husband,
and he shall rule over you."

17 And to Adam he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain
you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;

and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken; for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."

20 The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

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The twentieth century was a very disappointing century for utopians. As the century began there was great hope that we could steal back into the Garden of Eden where peace and harmony would reign. The century was marked by a number of "isms" that presented utopian ideologies. Fascism, Socialism and Communism were the trio that could not deliver. The millions of graves of those who were these ideologies victims testify to this.

As we begin a new century, utopian idealism is being re-born. It is finding expression as futurists are imagining a world where the marrying of technology with our bodies will allow us to reach our full potential within the next thirty to fifty years. It is a vision that promises Paradise can be regained as we tap into the fountain of youth. As such it is one more example of the human attempt to steal back into the Garden of Eden.

What is being taught runs something like this: Human beings are carbon based machines. The old view was that we received our human nature because we were born of a human mother. Human nature was a given. With the help of technology, the idea is growing that we no longer need these carbon based bodies. We can upgrade, like computers. In fact there are people who are trying to upgrade human

consciousness into computers that are not going to wear out like these carbon based bodies.

Now you need to know that this is not being discussed by science fiction writers. Nor is it being conceived by the lunatic fringe. The leading proponent of this thinking is Ray Kurzweil. He has received some of the highest degrees in the United States for innovation and technology. He has twelve honorary doctorates, presented to him by three presidents. Bill Gates calls him the best at “predicting the future of artificial intelligence.”¹

Kurzweil argues that our technology is so rapidly increasing that the day is coming when we will be able to combine our human intelligence with non human silicon chips, merging biological and non biological life forms, producing:

“Immortal software based humans. If anything the future will be more wonderful than anything we can imagine today”.

This is another utopian promise whose culmination we have yet to discover. Kurzweil’s is a vision that requires that human nature and human freedom lose all of its limits. Yet it, along with every other utopian ideal, runs counter to what we read today in Genesis Three. Here is a text which pronounces that the way back to the Garden is blocked to us. We cannot find our way back into Eden and any attempt to do so is but one more effort on our part to take from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and so displace God.

So the question that I want to ask today is will we be pilferers or pilgrims? A pilferer is someone who steals little by little that which belongs to others. To buy into these utopian visions is to believe that it is by stealth and human ingenuity that paradise can be regained. A pilgrim is a person who knows that the Garden of Eden is blocked by the cherubim with flaming swords. So while paradise cannot be regained, pilgrims are those people who are able to look forward to a better country whose builder and architect is God. As such pilgrims can look with realism at the present and to the future with hope. While pilgrims admit that Paradise has been lost, God is still very much present and gracious in the midst of this world marked by sinful alienation. Because of this we have hope. I want to highlight the

¹ This quote is found at <http://singularity.com/>, This is the home page for Kurzweil’s most recent book *The Singularity is Near*

realism and hope of this passage by making two points. Genesis 3: 14-25 teaches us that:

1. God gives us less than we deserve (the realism)

and

2. God gives us more than we deserve. (the hope)

Now before we go on I need to point out that there really should not be anything in the Bible after Genesis 3:13. Remember God had said to the man that "on the day you eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall die." And yet here we have verse 14 and the man and woman are not dead.

It is important for us to affirm that while death comes into the world through the action of Adam and Eve in displacing God as they listen to the utopian seduction of the evil one, they get far less than they deserve. They deserve death but instead are given life. Granted it is now life marked by death that includes suffering in the present and the ultimate decay of these carbon based bodies at the end.

At verse 16 we read:

16 To the woman he said,

"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.

Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

Here we see described the two most intimate relationships a woman can have, with her children and her husband.

What is remarkable about this verse is that rather than the woman's life being marked primarily by death, she is the one through whom God will bring forth new life. This is made clear in verse 20, where the woman is named for the first time. She is called "Eve", which means, "the mother of all living."

So while there will be given to her the gift of conception and the cooperative responsibility of child rearing, it is a calling that will be

fraught by risk and pain, not only in relation to her children but also in relation to her husband.

Although in the English translation the same word is used for pain in both lines of the verse, this is not the case in the Hebrew. The first occurrence of "pain" is found only three times in the Old Testament and speaks of emotional anxiety, worry and a whole host of words that underscore spiritual and psychological pain. The word described as "pain" in the second line is used elsewhere to describe strenuous work and is therefore understood in relation to child bearing.²

Here we see the coming together of the joy and suffering, blessing and curses of motherhood. From conception forward there is an ambiguity in the way a mother will relate to her children. While the pain of labour is relatively short lived, the spiritual and psychological pain is another matter. There may be some of you here today who are or have experienced this kind of pain as you think of your children. There has been so much heart ache and worry about them that at times it is overwhelming. While this is profoundly challenging, know that you are not abnormal to be experiencing this kind of suffering.

Such a struggle has been added to creation because of the Fall and the Fall Out. Consequently the very fabric of creation has been stained and looks very different from what was originally intended. With this staining comes the ambiguity and challenges of motherhood and the seemingly endless challenges that can mark the interpersonal relationship between husbands and wives.

The husband and wife ambiguity is expressed in our text by the words "desire for him" in relation to the woman and "rule over you" in relation to the man.

What is the meaning of this? Although sexual desire has a part to play in what is said here, it is of secondary importance. To understand it we need to read Genesis 4:7. Here we are in the story of Cain and Abel. God is speaking to Cain just before he kills his brother. In verse 7 God addresses Cain with these words:

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

² John H. Walton *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), page 227

The word used for desire and rule are the same as those used in chapter 3. Sin's desire is for Cain. It is not sexual desire. It is the desire to rule and master him. But Cain must master and dominate it.

Do you see what chapter three is saying? Here is the result of Sin. It is the battle of the sexes. The woman will desire to dominate her husband and he will want to master and control her.

It is an awful perversion of the unity and harmony that are captured in chapter 2. She no longer wants to help her husband, she wants to rule over him. He no longer wants to cling to his wife. He wants to dominate her. Husband and wives are now rivals.

This verse is empirically verifiable.

Sometimes woman can use their feminine character to manipulate and exploit their spouses or other men. It is a way to try to exercise domination. Conversely most abuse towards woman is perpetrated, not by strangers but at the hands of their own husbands. You may remember a year ago now 2000 Indo Canadian Women gathered in Vancouver to denounce the spousal abuse that was disclosed at their meeting. One woman, speaking in Punjabi and English, recounted 20 years of punches, slaps and taunts from the husband with whom she still lives. "If I can improve one girl's life (by speaking out), it is worth my husband's anger," she said.³

We need to understand that this verse is not prescriptive but descriptive. God is not saying I am going to make your lives miserable in this way because of what you have done. He is not prescribing a punishment. Rather he is describing that because you have violated my will there are consequences that are not what I had intended for you. Your relationships with children and spouse are now stained.

Let me return to the analogy of the stained fabric for a minute. The creator of the cloth intended it to be a certain way. If however it becomes stained due to a spill, the change was not the weaver's will but the consequence of the spill. The same can be said here. The spill was choosing to listen to the utopian promise of the serpent. The

³ MARGARET WENTE: "Wired for submission"
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20061104.COWENT04/TPStory/?query=Wente>

consequence is that we are all stained as a result. This is what theologians call Original Sin. All of creation has been affected as a result of this spill and the interpersonal struggles between children and parents, husbands and wives are those relationship most stained.

Our marriage, our family is meant to bring us the greatest joy. This is the thing we put at the top of our priority list, but because we have played God and because there is room for only one God, we have created a fearful unhappiness. Families are ripped apart and there are these terrible divisions across gender lines that effect parents and children both. This is part of the death that comes from abandoning God.

But we need to underscore that this is not God's design for the interpersonal relationship between husbands and wives, parents and children. As Christians we need to do everything we can to help people who are caught in this kind of cycle to be freed from it because it runs counter to God's intention for marriage and the family.

The New Testament is all to aware of how marriages so often operate. That is why Paul in Ephesians 5 speaks about how important it is for Christian husbands and wives, who are being recreated after the likeness of Jesus, to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ Jesus our Lord. It is also why he calls for children to obey their parents and for parents, especially fathers, to guard against provoking their children to anger.⁴

At verse 17 sentence is passed on man and illustrates the further staining of creation. "In toil you will eat. You are dust and to dust you shall return." Now the earth brings forth naturally weeds. The weeds always win. The work God modeled in chapter 1 that vividly portrayed creation perfectly responding to God now fights against the man. There is a struggle with the ground and while it is true that we can produce the most beautiful flowers, we constantly have to fight against the weeds. Just as the ground produces dust, we are reminded what when we toil in the earth, it is to dust and dirt that we will return.

St. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that all of creation is in bondage to decay and is groaning for liberation and freedom. We see this in our own day do we not with the realization that something is happening to our environment that confuses and beguiles us? It is in bondage to decay. And while we can still affirm that there is much in creation that is

⁴ Ephesians 5:22-6:4

stunning in its beauty we also know that there is a real disruption in creation as well.

But not only do we see this struggle with death within the horticultural realm, verse 19 reminds us that we will return to the dust of the ground. Physical death is the result of sin. Every non biblical system wants to domesticate death or deny it. This is in part what Ray Kurzweil is attempting to do by describing that day when we will achieve our ultimate destiny. Implied in this achievement will be our ability to stave off death by the merging of the carbon based bodies with nanotechnology.

Pilgrims are those who in recognizing that God has given us far less than we deserve are realists as we live in this world. However pilgrims are also people of profound hope as we contemplate that God also gives us far more than we deserve. In Genesis three this is expressed by three acts of grace.

1. He protects us with skins.

At verse 21 we read: "The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." Earlier on in the chapter we read of the man and the woman trying to clothe themselves with fig leaves. It was a woefully inadequate means of covering themselves and ends in shame and blame. But here in verse 21 God is committed to providing the covering they need. He makes it possible for them to overcome the alienation that they are responsible for. God is committed to being our God, in spite of our rejection of him. He takes this initiative to cover our sins and the results of our sins with a gift that is completely free and much much more than we deserve. You will notice that the sacrifice of the animals would have been needed for the skins to be made. This of course points to that sacrifice we will celebrate in the Sacrament of Communion, where through the death of His Son we are clothed with a perfect righteousness that is not our own. And thereby he removes alienation and shame and gives us far more than we desire or deserve.

It is because he clothes us with his perfect righteousness that we are people who are called to live differently from the world in our marriages and parent child relationships.

The second act of grace is that God:

2. Banishes us from the garden.

Let me reading verses 22- 25.

Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

At first sight this seems like punishment. Why would God keep us from the Tree of Life? It is because we cannot live inside the Garden with access to the tree when we are living in rebellion against God. But because we live outside the garden this explains the home sickness and desire we have for utopian ideals. God says no to them all. We cannot play god and take from the Tree of Life. The Bible is clear that in our natural state we are now alienated from God. We do not walk in friendly fellowship with him.

Have you ever thought of this, that God does not choose to rip out the Tree of Life? Rather he protects the Tree so that he can bring us back into paradise through the way of redeeming grace. If Adam and Eve had been able to eat in their lost condition they would have been lost eternally. God removes our access to the tree of life out of love for us. And yet in Christ, this access has been regained for us. We are people of such deep and abiding hope because we have assurance that in the future we will partake fully of this tree. This is why Paul can say in Romans 8: 18:

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

The third act of grace of grace is the most stunning one of all:

3. God will put enmity between the woman and her seed and the serpent.⁵

So we read in verse 15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your
head,
and you shall bruise his heel."

To put enmity between the Serpent and the woman means that God is going to change the religious affections of the woman and her offspring so she will turn away from Satan and love God again. He is putting humanity on his side of the conflict with Satan. It is an act of stunning kindness.

More than that God is saying that I am so committed to this battle that this struggle which will be the fundamental story line of all history will come to a climax in two champions. One is the Serpent and one is the seed of woman. In that climatic battle, the serpent's head will be bruised and the Seed of Woman will bear a terrible price. He too will be bitten and bruised on the heel

Now the way of God because of our Sin is the way of suffering and the way of death. It will be through the death of His Son, Eve's Seed, on the Cross, that will win the Victory. Through the weakness of death the power of Satan will be broken. Not through technology, not through some utopian social reconstruction, but through a mighty act of love that gives itself over to death for us.

Jesus appeared to destroy the works of the Devil. He bruised the Serpents head and in doing so he allowed the Serpent to sink his fangs into his heel and he drained all the venom Satan has, on the Cross.

The Book of Hebrews says:

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

⁵ This point is taken verbatim from a sermon by the Reverend David Short "Truth and Consequences" found at: <http://www.stjohnsshaughnessy.org/files/05nov06.mp3>.

It's wonderful isn't it? There is only one Son of Eve who had no sin. There is only one Son who didn't try to play God but did the opposite. He didn't count equality with God as something to be exploited but he emptied himself. He was struck for us and because he was struck he opens the gate that the Cherubim guards and he has granted us access to the tree of life in the paradise of God.

Conclusion:

In Conclusion let me say one thing about us and one thing about God.

Genesis three teaches us that human nature cannot be changed but by a mighty miracle of God's grace. Human nature is not unlimited, and potentially unbounded. We were created for blessings by God within God's boundaries. Moving outside of those boundaries is the way of death. Our nature cannot be changed. It can be educated, it can be sophisticated, it can learn all sorts of manners but at its core human nature remains profoundly anti-God, and anti-others. Therefore it requires the miracle of God's grace to bring washing, regeneration and recreation.

The idea that we are essentially good in our nature is a dreadful lie. It is a contradiction of scripture. It is a mockery of the Cross. Apart from Jesus Christ at the centre of our nature we are alienated from God and each other. This alienation came because we rejected his goodness.

Finally, a word about God. I do hope you can see that every word in this passage bears witness to the compassion, and the kindness and the mercy, and the grace and the love of God. He does not give us what we deserve. He gives us what we do not deserve. Through Adam's life death came to all. Through Christ's death, life is now available to all. Genesis three leaves us in no doubt that the problem is so deep and so profound that we need to be made anew. We don't turn over a new leaf as it were. Everything God does, and everything he says demonstrates his commitment to overcoming our sin, overcoming that alienation and inviting us back into the Paradise he created for us, so that we might walk with him and share with him the Tree of Life forever.

When we know this truth we can say no to the lure of the pilferer who wants us to join him in breaking back into the Garden and join with those who are on pilgrimage as we live realistically in the present

because we know the power of Sin and yet we also live hopefully,
because we know that God's grace is greater still.