

You got to love the Bible. It is so real, so true, even if sometimes it is not historical. This is especially true when you confront a book like Genesis, the source for our first reading for today. We know that much of this book is not historical. Snakes don't talk, at least the ones I know of. But they do in this marvelous mythic tale. They, or more appropriately, it speaks to the first man and first woman, and lies to them: "Did God say that you should not eat from any tree in the garden?" Well, no, he didn't say that. He said that they could eat from *all* the trees, except for one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they shall die. This is often how it works. Overstatement! You can't do anything. Nothing is allowed. This kind of thought is what a lot of religion becomes. A giant list of what you can't do. That's not what God said and did. In God's garden, it was much more about permission than forbidden-ness.

The talking snake continues the conversation: "If you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will not die," as God says; "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Man, that sounds good. Who doesn't want some good knowledge?

So, the woman took a bite of the fruit and then gave it to the man. And wow! Something happened. They grew up. They saw things they hadn't seen before, including their own nakedness. They hadn't noticed it before. Now for some reason, they now see it. For some reason, shame has visited them.

Now God seems less worked up over that than they do, for it appears that God hasn't given up on them. In fact, he goes looking for them. In a delightful part of the story, we are told that God went walking in the garden at evening time. God is no dummy. He knows that walking in the garden in the middle of the day would be entirely

too hot. So, he goes during the evening. He really cares for his garden and the residents within it. He wants to know what is up with them. And guess what? They are busy hiding.

“Where are you?” God wants to know. I guess God doesn’t know everything.

The man responds: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked.” Well, for heaven sakes, God made you. I think he knows what you look like naked! But the man says that he was hiding himself from God.

The Bible is so true, isn’t it? What happens when shame enters our lives? We look the other way. We hide. We hang our heads. We cover up our nakedness.

So, “have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” God inquires. God is a quick study. “What is this that you have done?”

“Well,” the man responds, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit. She’s to blame.”

The woman, not to be outdone by the man in blaming, says, “No, it’s the doggone snake’s fault. He tricked me, and I ate.”

And you don’t think the Bible is true? Shame or fear followed by blame. Call it the “shame and blame” shuffle. Human beings are proficient at it. It’s always somebody else’s fault.

I remember riding on a bike trail in Cincinnati, watching a family of a little boy, father, mother and grandfather, coming at me. I slowed down because you never know what’s going to happen when kids are riding their bikes. The little boy as he approached me from the other direction turned around and looked at his grandfather and started talking to him, swerving into my part of the trail as he did so. I ran right into him and fell right on top of him, knocking him to the ground. The minute he got up, he yelled at the top of his lungs: “It’s his fault; he

made me do it.” Well, no. There have been many times I have been at fault. But this wasn’t one of them. But his fear—fear of what his parents and grandfather were going to do or say, I bet—drove him to blame. It’s what happens in life. Get the attention off of us. Focus it on someone else. Blame is one of our specialties. Isn’t the Bible true?

The primary message of this marvelous mythic story from Genesis is that the human problem is that we would much rather live on the basis of knowledge, rather than trust. We would rather figure out life on our own terms, rather than receive it for what it is. We would rather live on the basis of control.

Now don’t get me wrong. Knowledge is a really good thing. Learning is phenomenally significant. And we see that these days as we, through bad news sources and social media sites, are given a lot of false information, false knowledge. The great disdain for science among some these days is truly appalling. Part of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God is to be co-creators with God, seeking new knowledge, exploring new vistas, imagining the unimaginable. That’s a good part of being human.

But life at its deepest, at its best is not something that can be conquered by our knowledge. Life at its deepest and its best is mysterious. Life at its deepest and its best is not fully figure-out-able. Life at its best is not a matter of our control. Life at its deepest and its best is life received as gift. Now I know that it takes a while in life to get that. But the Bible is true in its assessment of what happens when we don’t believe that. Fear. Shame. Blame. When we don’t receive life in trust, we live trying to control it and people. Control, which is often rooted in fear, leads to all kinds of negative consequences. Genesis talks about it as a matter of enmity, antagonism, hostility. People, life itself, are torn apart because we would rather live by control, than by trust.

Genesis is honest and says that this is the situation we all live in. There is no getting around it. We live, as the novel from John Steinbeck labels it, “east of Eden.” Humans like to control. Blame is one of our specialties. Enmity and hostility are all around us. This could be a source for great despair, and once in a while it is. Sometimes you just look at life and people and say, “Ugh, it’s all such a mess.”

But this is not the final word, the last thing we have to say. It is not the final thing that Genesis says. And you got to get this. The man and the woman try to hide in the garden, but God goes looking for them. He had told them that if they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die. Bad things happened. There were consequences. But they didn’t die. God must have changed his mind. And in the end of the story that follows what is our text for today, we are told that God in response to the humans who are now plagued with shame and are preoccupied with their nakedness, clothes them not with fig leaves, which are like sandpaper by the way, but with leather garments. The humans find themselves in a new place, a not-so-good place, but God meets them and embraces them where they are.

We call this action of God *grace*. Grace brought life into being. Grace gave the humans each other. Grace even redeems life gone astray. Grace even receives people who live in light of shame and blame, that is, all of us. Grace includes dysfunctional people and families, broken people and families, hurting people and families. The cross of Jesus becomes the supreme sign of grace, the supreme sign that God lives where we live, East of Eden, seeking us out, meeting us where we are, loving us, forgiving us, and then binding us into a family, as Jesus in Mark says today, that is not simply about blood and genetics. The community that we belong to includes those who “do the will of God,” those who don’t trust the snake, but trust the crazy story of grace.

