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## “Blame It on the Snake”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

June 7, 2015

Genesis 3:8–15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

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*Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord;*

*O Lord, hear my voice.*

*Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.*

*If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,*

*O Lord, who could stand? (from Psalm 130)*

If I were Eve, or if Eve were me,

we would be rehashing our first conversation with God out of the depths,

in the dark of the night, tossing and turning,

thrashing around in the sheets, for the rest of our lives.

It didn't go **so** badly, did it?

After all, God only asked a question of us, “Where are you?”

The very first time that God even speaks to humankind directly,

it is in the form of a question: “Where are you?”

No accusation is implied; it is simply a question.

Perhaps it was intended as Godly play: a prelude to hide and seek,

an invitation to be in a relationship of lost and found, finders keepers.

But no, we couldn't step into the game that our Creator initiated;

we had to invent a game of our own designing: pass the blame

from man to woman to snake.

And once we started down that road, we were caught in our own game,  
and things have never been the same since then.

How did God expect us to answer that question? "Here we are, over here,  
on the ground beside the fig tree, learning a new skill, we have named sewing."

Adam, the first to respond to God, perhaps should have been more  
respectful and deferential and said, "Lord, because you are omniscient  
and know all things, you, of course, know exactly where we are."

Perhaps I should have followed with, "Lord, you have created us and gifted us with  
a good and beautiful garden and much freedom to enjoy it fully.

You should trust that we are using your gifts wisely."

Perhaps dragging a snake into the conversation was way over the top.  
Could we do it over again please, when the morning comes, at first light?

We seem to have gotten off on the wrong footing, Lord,  
and now everything is askew. Can we begin again?

Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner says of Eve:

"It was only once in a while at night,  
just as she was going off to sleep with all her usual defenses down,  
that her mind drifted back to the days when,  
because there was nothing especially important to do,  
everything was especially important,  
when *too good not to be true* hadn't yet turned into  
*too good to be true*,  
when being alone was never the same as being lonely.

Then sad and beautiful dreams overtook her,  
which she would wake up from

homesick for a home she could no longer even name..."

(Frederick Buechner. *Beyond Words*, "Eve", p. 97)

*Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord;  
O Lord, hear my voice.*

You might notice that most of the issues that theology traditionally has attached to this episode in the garden are specifically not mentioned here. Sin is not mentioned, nor is blame, nor is The Fall, nor sex, nor Original Sin: all these later will find their genesis in this specific story.

My tendency here is to call it a story of "Original If Only", as in,  
*if only we had we had spoken our truth to Yahweh,  
if only we had confessed our anxious mistrust of our Creator,  
if only we had professed that being created good does not necessarily  
mean being created perfect.*

This certainly seems to be the primal dark night of the soul, the primordial "out of the depths" from which the psalmist later will beg for God's merciful attention.

Henry Marsh, one of Britain's foremost neurosurgeons, has written a memoir cataloguing some of his most unforgiving mistakes in a book entitled *Do No Harm (Thomas Dunne)*.

He is now sixty-five, at the apogee of a career marked by many stellar interventions and innovations, such as the technique of keeping patients awake, using local anesthesia during brain surgery so they can converse with the surgeons while they operate, allowing them to avoid damaging useful parts of the brain.

Marsh should be basking in the glow of success and resting on his laurels. Still, he says, "As I approach the end of my career, I feel an increasing obligation to bear witness to past mistakes I have made..."

The more I thought about the past, the more mistakes rose to the surface, like poisonous methane stirred up from a stagnant pond."

I read about Dr. Marsh in a book review in the *New Yorker*

and was moved by his need to justify his successes with his failures,  
and to not just think life but to feel life in all its nuances.

One particular incident he notes involved a brain surgery, begun at nine a.m.:

a tedious operation to remove a tumor growing near the base of a man's skull.

After 15 hours of surgery, as midnight grew near,

Marsh had removed almost all of the tumor and should have been  
satisfied with an almost perfect procedure.

"I should have stopped at that point and left the last piece behind," he says.

But he wanted the privilege of saying that he had gotten it all.

"As I started to remove the last part of the tumor," Marsh writes,

"I tore a small perforating branch off the basilar artery, a vessel the width  
of a thick pin." The patient never regained consciousness.

Marsh says he is not interested in telling about his errors so others can avoid them,  
or learn from his mistakes.

Nor is he interested in passing the blame or unburdening himself of the consequences.

"He writes about his errors because he wants to confess them,

and because he's interested in his inner life and how it's been changed  
over time, by the making of mistakes."

(Joshua Rothman. "Anatomy of Error". *New Yorker*, May 18, 2015, p. 99)

His confession is an act of reckless honesty: an act of atonement.

He says that when he delivered it as a speech before an audience of neurosurgical  
colleagues, it was met with stunned silence and no questions asked.

Perhaps this is how Adam and Eve should have responded to

the Almighty's first question of "Where are you": with reckless honesty.

Perhaps home would not seem so far away if we could manage to do that.

Of course, most of us are not neurosurgeons, whose slip-ups are a difference  
of life and death.

But all of us do make mistakes: errors of omission or commission,

errors that go unannounced, errors of snake-blaming, errors of collusion,

errors of being at the wrong place at the wrong time,  
errors of lapses in judgment, errors of pride.

As a pastor and as a former Hospice volunteer, I'm sometimes put  
in the uncomfortable spot of being on the receiving  
end of someone's end-of-life confession.

Good people, some salt of the earth people, on occasion will venture into a  
soliloquy of failures: failure to love a spouse as much as one should,  
failure to spend enough time with a child,  
failure to support parents in their old age, failure to provide for the family.

And when I start to hear this reckless honesty pouring forth  
from some of my favorite people, especially when they are so ill or even dying,  
my inclination is to shush them,  
to stem the flow of misspeaks and missteps,  
to wrap my arms around them in a hug,  
and say to them, "That's enough, that's enough; everything will be okay."

But often life does hinge upon one word misspoken or two,  
and everything is not okay, and home in the garden seems far away.

So I let them continue until they complete their litany because their inner life  
is at stake, because their "at-onement" with God and others is at stake,  
because their mental wholeness is at stake,  
because their making of peace with themselves is at stake.

We are talking about Confession here, one of the central practices of worship  
in the Reformed Tradition.

We weekly confess our misspeaks and missteps before God and one another.  
Our encounter with the Holy God in worship is grounded in a humbling awareness  
of our meager adequacy to measure up as human beings.

We are "weighed in the balance and found wanting" (Daniel 5:27).

When the prophet Isaiah has his initial experience of God, high and lifted up,  
surrounded by winged seraphs with earth-shaking voices, he cries out,

“Woe is me! I am ruined, for I am a being of unclean lips  
and live among people of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6:4)

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with this exposed  
awareness of God’s place and humanity’s place in the created order of things:

“Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom,  
consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...  
For there exists in humanity something like a world of misery, and ever since we were  
stripped of the divine attire, our naked shame discloses an immense series of  
disgraceful properties every person, being stung by consciousness of his or her own  
unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God. Thus, our  
feeling of ignorance, vanity, want, weakness, in short depravity and corruption, reminds  
us that in the Lord, and none but He, dwell the true light of wisdom, solid virtue, and  
exuberant goodness.” (John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 1.1.1)

Our experience of God’s holiness quickly evolves into an experience  
of our unholiness: we don’t match up, we fall short, we are unjustified.

And so we confess.

Some of us love this practice, the chance to clear the air, the chance to  
be brutally honest, the chance to be vulnerable, the chance to ask forgiveness,  
the chance to be fully human as God created us.

Ellie Dilworth, a member of the confirmation class this year,  
said Confession is her favorite part of worship, and I admire her for saying that.

Jane Williams, one of our newer church members who holds a Ph.D. in Psychology,  
says that good church can be good preventive mental health care:

we are stabilized by being in community, we are accepted even when we fail,  
we can be our real selves, we are forgiven and granted second chances.

Some of us don’t resonate with a public confession. We feel that we are confessing  
in unison sins not of our making or doing, sins of someone else’s unclean lips.

And so we shut our mouths and sit in silence during that part of the service.

I used to do that myself when I was much younger,

before I became aware of my proclivity to misspeak and misstep,  
and to be complicit in things beyond my knowing.

One of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons shows a giant barn that has been  
chained and padlocked closed.

And the Early American Gothic farmer stiffly stands just outside the bulging barn  
with pitchfork in hand, glancing down to instruct his young child, saying,  
“This is the barn where we keep our feelings. If a feeling comes to you,  
bring it out here and lock it up.” (*New Yorker*. September 8, 2014)

That was me in my earlier American Gothic stage of life, but now I don’t find  
this attitude to be optimal for anyone’s mental health  
or for their spiritual well-being.

And so we confess. We confess with reckless honesty, I hope, if not out loud,  
then in the silence of our hearts.

And were I to be brutally honest with myself before you, I might confess:

- that I’m an introvert... and sometimes I’m almost socially retarded;
- that I’m not as smart as many of you; I just try very hard;
- that my head is very often turned by flattery;
- that I wish I could be your friend, but I can’t do that and be your pastor, too;
- that I don’t really know how to respond to the issue of police discrimination in  
our community without addressing my own tendency to discriminate;
- that I jump every time the doorbell rings at the church.

In Psalm 130, the petitioner cries out to the Lord from the depths of his or her despair,  
concerning not only personal wrongs,

but the corporate wrongs of the community as well.

And while he or she might stand in sheer terror before Yahweh God,  
should the Lord keep track of all the wrongs noted,

instead there is awe and reverence of God Almighty,  
for the restraint of power, for the negative capability of rush to judgment,  
and for the positive capability, instead, to—one word—forgive.

"For forgiveness is with You," the Psalmist affirms.  
And then the psalmist waits, hopes, and watches, perhaps for that one word  
of forgiveness that will bring freedom of conscience.  
Even though life can hinge upon one word misspoken, or two,  
and everything is not okay, and home in the garden seems far away,  
one word from God or one Word Made Flesh has the power to redeem and to restore.  
One little word has the power to fell the prince of darkness grim.  
And so the psalmist watches for the Lord,  
more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn.  
"A watchman sitting through the last three watches of the night,  
peering into the darkness for the first sign of dawn,  
cannot equal one's intense expectancy for God's redeeming word  
to come into the dark night of one's soul."

(Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, Psalm 130, footnote 6, p. 456.)

I want to close with a *Good Poem for Hard Times*, from Garrison Keillor's anthology  
called "Dawn Revisted" by Rita Dove.

Imagine you wake up  
with a second chance: The blue jay  
hawks his pretty wares  
and the oak still stands, spreading  
glorious shade. If you don't look back,

the future never happens.  
How good to rise in the sunlight,  
in the prodigal smell of biscuits—  
eggs and sausage on the grill.

The whole sky is yours



to write on, blown open  
to a blank page. Come on,  
shake a leg! You'll never know  
who's down there, frying those eggs,  
if you don't get up and see.

Amen.