



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

This is Your Life
Part 4
Eve

Selected verses from Genesis

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Message from November 18, 2018

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Here we are at the end of our sermon series “This is Your Life,” based on that 1950 and 60’s radio and then television show that was really reality TV ahead of its time. You might remember—a famous person was caught unaware by host Ralph Edwards and became the special featured guest. People from his or her past were sequestered back stage and at just the right moment, would share a memory of the guest before emerging from behind the curtain to reveal their identity. It was full of surprises, laughs and sometimes interesting insights. Watching the show gave an opportunity to peer into the life of a person, to learn more about them from a variety of angles as each person shared a different facet of the featured guest.

As we planned for worship for this fall, we were intrigued by the possibilities of taking a closer look and inviting a biblical character to be our special guest, to see what surprises their lives might hold for us, from a variety of perspectives.

We’ve gotten to know Rahab, whose very name means prostitute. Rahab encountered God, and her deep faith compelled her to courageous acts. She’s even included in the Hall of Faith in the book of Hebrews. Probably her biggest claim to fame is that her faith gained her the distinction of being one of the few women named in the lineage of Jesus.

Last week we got to know Saul, became Paul, the apostle of Tarsus. A murderer and persecutor of the early Christians, Saul met God on the road to Damascus and his life was forever changed, as was his name. From Paul, we learned that we are more than our worst mistake, that God’s forgiveness is amazing, and dramatic transformation can and does happen.

And as I pondered who we might get to know better on this last Sunday of the series, I chose to return to the very beginning, to the Garden of Eden, and to Eve. Actually my memory goes back to my 17-year-old self. Before synchronized swimming was ever an Olympic sport, my high school had a club—The FHS Synchronettes. Each year we would perform a show of aquatic numbers, choreographed to music. And I chose to be Eve, swimming to “Born Free” because I liked the

2 music and the lyrics. Even though I didn't know it at the time, maybe theology played a part in that selection! I self-identified with Eve, born free to follow my heart, as the song goes.

And yet, I think Eve often gets a bad rap. She's called cunning, a temptress, and has been shamed, blamed and guilted in every way over the centuries.... surely a second class citizen, trapped in the institution of patriarchy...consider that...

- The brilliant Jewish interpreter Philo claimed that the serpent (in the garden) approached Eve rather than Adam because "women are naturally more influenced by their emotions than are men, who are more rational."
- In the apocryphal wisdom book, Sirach, writes, "From a woman, sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die."
- And even the New Testament appears at times to teach that women should never exercise authority over men. After all, Adam was not deceived, Eve was, and she fell into transgression. Therefore, women may hope to be saved through childbearing. 1 Timothy 2.13–15

These have been ingrained understandings by many in the Christian church and have helped to justify the inequality, discrimination and oppression of women throughout the ages. While we can only scratch the surface in one sermon, it opens again the dialog and opportunity to look once more, in search for new light and new meaning. Whenever we preach, it is our hope to provoke thinking and to promote conversation. There will most likely be more questions than answers. But that's not so un-Eve-like, is it?

So dear Eve, if this is your life, what's it all about?

Various theories regarding the origin of Genesis and the story of Eve in particular, have evolved. Some scholars believe that

parts of Genesis are based on myths and fables. Others call it a “legend wrapped around fundamental spiritual truths.” All bible scholars agree that the stories of Creation were conceived by an ancient people, to whom great truths about the spiritual universe in which they lived were unfolding.

Let’s look at the Eve story as recorded in Genesis:

SELECTED VERSES FROM GENESIS 2 AND 3

God took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden to work the ground and keep it in order. God commanded the Man, “You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don’t eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you’re dead.” ...

God said, “It’s not good for the Man to be alone; I’ll make him a helper, a companion.”

God put the Man into a deep sleep. As he slept he removed one of his ribs and replaced it with flesh. God then used the rib that he had taken from the Man to make Woman and presented her to the Man. The Man said, “Finally! Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! Name her Woman for she was made from Man.”

Given the context, there are a few things it’s important to debunk, in helping us to better understand the Eve story:

1. There are some who propose that because God created woman second and fashioned her out of Adam’s rib, she is inferior and subordinate to Adam. In the biblical context, however, taking a rib from the side is not a symbolic indication of inferiority rather of solidarity and equality.
2. Tradition might surmise that Eve was an afterthought. Scholars propose that Eve is the culmination of creation because she was created last!
3. The scriptures have been interpreted that God created a “helper” fit for man, meaning the helper was

4 woman. The word in the original language is *ezer*, which is also used elsewhere to describe God, as “helper” to Israel—certainly not an inferior role, but one of mutuality and again, equality. It’s all about context.

The story continues—

...The serpent was clever, more clever than any wild animal God had made. He spoke to the Woman: “Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?”

The Woman said to the serpent, “Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the garden. It’s only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘Don’t eat from it; don’t even touch it or you’ll die.’” The serpent told the Woman, “You won’t die. God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you’ll see what’s really going on. You’ll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil.” When the Woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it—she’d know everything!—she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to her husband, and he ate.

What if Eve’s motivation here was not about subversion, not about tempting Adam, not about a snake curling suggestively around her body, as some have pictured her. What if Eve’s motivation was to gain wisdom? And she did.

There are a few details in this story that have gone unnoticed.

1. God doesn’t prohibit Eve from eating the fruit. God fills the garden of Eden with trees that bear fruit. Yet God sets apart one tree as forbidden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God provides this instruction to Adam, but not to Eve. She hadn’t been created yet. And another side note...traditionally it has been thought that Eve plucked an apple from the tree. But it couldn’t have been an apple tree, which would not have been able to thrive in that climate. It’s

been conjectured that perhaps it was a fig, or pomegranate or even a mango tree!

2. The serpent didn't really trick Eve. Everything the serpent told Eve is true. She didn't die from eating the fruit as God had warned.
3. Thirdly, Eve eats the forbidden fruit because it promises wisdom. She sees that it's "good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes," she also recognizes that the tree was to be desired to make one wise. Having eaten the fruit, she now knows good from evil.

By eating the forbidden fruit, Eve and Adam grow into human maturity. We may romanticize their pre-fruit-eating days in the garden and call it utopia, paradise. Where there's no pain. No fear. No sin. No alienation. But I would argue that where the knowledge of good and evil is lacking, so is maturity. Growing in wisdom requires pain, risk, and the presence of sin. We humans know that.

Imagine Eve before the fruit debacle. How could she know the value of honesty and truth if there is no un-truth? How could she cultivate courage in the absence of danger and even death? How could she, how could we, express compassion in a world without injustice, suffering, pain? Eve could not experience the fullness of humanity apart from the knowledge of good and evil.

Eve gives us someone with whom we can identify. We can learn from Eve.

Eve reminds us that God loves us. "Remember," she whispers through the words of Genesis, "God made you. God made you on purpose. The world was only 'very good' once you were in it. It was 'not good' without you...you were always a part of the plan."

God did not have to put the tree in the Garden of Eden. God could have left out the tree. But instead, God decided to give humankind a choice, and we chose to choose. That choice gave Eve (and Adam) the knowledge of good and evil. It gave

6 them wisdom. Perhaps we don't fully understand the difference between good and evil until we have dipped into both.

One of my favorite pastors, theologians and authors is Lillian Daniels. She says "God could have created us like little house cats, where God would deliver a little bowl of fresh water, a little food and a garden full of catnip. We wouldn't ever get outside, but we would be brushed, babied and loved. Instead God put this little cat flap on the garden's door and said, "I dare you." Eve, and Adam, took the dare. Next thing you know, they are outside the garden. Escaping through the cat flap of good and evil, they made their break for freedom. And the human race was born, complete with challenge, choice and curiosity.

Eve, this is your life—a life of challenge, choice and curiosity. And because of who you are, we have been bequeathed a life of challenge, choice and curiosity. And for that, we give thanks.

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