

Genesis 3: 1-8

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves

**Let's Hear It for the Snake**  
**Rev. Charles Schuster**  
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I want to express appreciation to Rick Bremer our guest organist today, and also to Andrew and Gretchen, two graduate students. We are so lucky to be in the community where we are where we have access to the talent that is here in the town and here in the school. We're very fortunate.

Having taught United Methodist doctrine for three years, and two of the students I had are actually in the room, at Iliff School of Theology, I'm aware of how difficult it is for seminary students and really for all of us, but especially seminary students studying for the ministry to understand how as Methodists, United Methodists, we hold together concepts, ideas, that compete, that conflict. For example, we do hold together the idea that there is something sort of basically, fundamentally wrong with us, original sin, and we do hold, in tension with that, the idea that John Wesley expressed, that we are moving on to perfection. We don't stay stuck. We hold these two contradictory concepts together believing that as human beings we are to carry the curse of our disobedience and the invitation to rise to become new being. This morning I will try to show how we balance that contradiction of our curse and our blessing. If it were a class, I would deliver a lecture, and at the end of the lecture there would be a pop quiz. But since it's worship, I'll preach a sermon and take up an offering and invite you to the table.

I think that this is on my mind now because there have been people bitten by rattlesnakes here recently, up there at the reservoir. If the mosquitoes don't get you, the rattlesnakes will. I don't like snakes. Somebody in the eight o'clock service came out after the service, up to me, and said, "I love snakes." I looked at him and said, "You must be a Presbyterian or an Episcopalian or something." I know snakes are God's creatures, and in the scheme of things they play a role, an important role, but I don't like them and I never have. I remember when I was four years old and first aware that there were such things as

snakes. I ran to my mother, and “Down in the window well of our house,” I said “there’s a large, mean-looking worm,” and she wouldn’t believe me, and then I took her and showed her. I guess she didn’t like snakes either, because what happened next to that snake wasn’t Christian, and my mother went to church every Sunday.

I have never been fond of snakes. They give me the creeps, I don’t like how they slither around. I don’t like the ones that rattle and warn you. The ones that I knew about, along with those, were those copperheads, and they were so mean they’d come out looking for you and wouldn’t even warn you, and then bite you. Now, here’s the strange thing. I don’t like snakes, but I’m absolutely fascinated by them. When the crocodile hunter went after the black mambo, runs as fast as a pickup truck, can drop dead an elephant with one bite, I couldn’t not watch. And when we go to Marble Falls, Texas, in the window of the hardware store, they put something like fifty, sixty snakes in the window enclosure, I will walk across the street to see that. I don’t like snakes, but I can’t help being interested in them. I must be a Presbyterian or an Episcopalian.

Lots of things are like that, though. This past week some very nice people in our church took me out to the ranch where they raise Clydesdale horses, and they’re here, Abby and Curtis, thank you. Curtis said to me as I was getting ready to leave, he said, “Come over here, I want to show you something.” So we’re standing behind this fence, and in front of us is this field. It’s a football and a half length, 150 yards, I’m guessing. It’s a huge field. At the end of this fields is a little shack, and he starts yelling out for some animal. He calls out once and there’s no response, twice, three times, and there’s no response. And so we walk around, and now we’re inside the fence, and he calls out to Benjie. “Benjie.” First thing that happens is, this horse sticks its head out of the shed. It’s way down at the other end of the field. It’s a Clydesdale, he’s a magnificent Clydesdale. You can see the snout, the face and the head of this thing, it’s got this white marking on it. Stone black, and he’s got his ears up, and he hears Curtis, and he comes out and aims himself at us. Curtis says, “Watch this.” He calls out again, and Benjie starts running toward us. Man, there’s dust and dirt and stuff flying all over the place, the big feet those animals have. It’s a huge horse, coming right at us, a beautiful thing. You know how they kind of prance as they march, running at us. The earth is shaking, the dust and dirt is flying, this Clydesdale with its huge feet running at full speed, prancing like they do, is one of the most wonderful things I’ve ever seen or heard. Benjie’s getting closer and closer, and it began to cause me to reflect. “Curtis, don’t you think we ought to be on the other side of this fence, because he’s coming in,” his horse’s pounding feet come drumming in and I said to myself, “I wonder if he has brakes?” It was a magnificent sight to see, it was a frightening thing to watch. I wanted to run, but I wanted to stay, both at the same time.

That’s the way it is with a lot of things. A lot of things, they’re just in conflict with us. We’re not sure, it goes one way or the other, we hold them in tension. A father’s promised his son, “You practice all day and I’ll play baseball with you after work.” The dad comes home, goes out into the back yard – “Show me what you learned.” The little boy picks up the bat, goes up to the ball and swings and misses it. Dad says, “Strike one.” He picks up the ball again, throws it up in the air, swings with the bat, misses it. “Strike two!” Picks up the ball, throws it in the air, swings with the bat really hard, fiercely hard.

Swings around, falls down on the ground. “Strike three, you’re out,” says the dad. The son gets up, looks at his dad and says, “Boy, I’m a good pitcher.”

There are things that are like that, you know, things that contradict, that we hold together, contradictory, conflicting, and we have them both. “Strike three, what a pitcher.” We look at one of the best-known stories in the Bible, the Adam and Eve story, the snake in the garden, Paradise, the book of Genesis, the first of the five books called the Pentateuch. That was all one book once, you know, and it’s real late, it’s not early. It’s the first of the Bible because of its subject, because it had the Law. The snake pays a visit to Adam and Eve. For those who don’t know the names, the word Adam means dirt, the word Eve means life. The story brings out strong feelings, feelings that are in conflict with each another. So let’s hear it for the snake. It’s true, if it hadn’t been for the snake in the story, if it hadn’t been for the problem in the Garden, if the snake hadn’t convinced the woman to convince the man, if the man and woman in that (I think) metaphor, parable, if the man and women hadn’t taken the forbidden fruit, what would we need Jesus for? How could Jesus be a lord and savior, if there’d been nothing to save? Sin, we’re talking about sin here, the sin of omission and the sin of commission. A Sunday School teacher, probably in one of our classes, asked the student, “Do you know what the sins of omission are?” From the back of the room, after a long silence, came the words, “Sins of omission, they’re the sins we should have committed and just haven’t gotten around to yet.”

I like Lance Webb’s definition of sin. He said, “Sin is that which causes us to miss the mark even when we see it.” Sin is that which forces us, when we want to be mature, to continue to be immature. Sin is that thing which makes us, even when we want to be productive, to be destructive. Sin, it’s original, and we’re all sinners. I mean we’re all guilty and we know it. Two children walking into a museum, and one of Lewis McInnis’s abstract paintings is back there on the wall. One kid turns to the other and says, “We gotta get out of here. They’ll think we did that.” There’s always something we’re guilty of, and some day they’re going to find out, and if somebody confesses to something that we get credit for, we’ll take the blame for it. That’s because there’s something wrong with us, there just is. It’s our starting point, that’s our original sin, there’s something just not the heck right with us, you know? It’s descriptive of our place in life. We sin, we’re sinners. Leonard Sweet is president of Drew Seminary, that’s where David Dalke went to seminary, that’s where he learned about this stuff, in New Jersey.

Leonard Sweet’s from West Virginia, he’s always telling West Virginia stories. He said a West Virginian was asked for directions to a certain place, and after thinking about it for a long time, he turned to the stranger and said, “If I’d be wanting to get there, I wouldn’t have started from here.” There comes a time when we have to look at our starting point, there comes a time when it’s important to look at where we’ve been and how we got there, and to know if we keep doing what we’re doing, we’re going to keep getting what we got. We’re guilty because we are. Isn’t that what that story’s about, it’s all of us some of the time sinners, some of us all of the time sinners. All of us have met the snake in the garden. All of us have tasted the forbidden fruit. Some of us just make a snack of it, but some of us make it a whole meal. We met the snake. We met the snake in the garden. We

met the snake in the garden, it happened under a porch, when two boys sat down under there and smoked their first cigar and got sick, we met the snake in the garden there. We met the snake in the garden in high school, in a math class, when the desk next to us had the answers to the questions that somehow leaped over and got onto our page, we met the snake there. We met the snake in the garden in the locker room at school when a substance was offered that would guarantee performance, but at a price, and we took it anyway – we met the snake there. We met the snake in the garden in the back seat of a car when things got a little out of hand, you know what I mean. You know what I mean, don't you know what I mean? My goodness, they don't know what I mean. We met the snake in the garden when a look of respect turned to a passion of lust and a colleague became an object, not a respected child of God. We met the snake in the garden when in order to close a deal we had to tell a white lie, or not the complete truth, but we got bills to pay, and we did it

The snake in our garden speaks to us, it says “Aw, go ahead, it doesn't matter, what harm can it do,” and so it's done. What have we become? A sinner, separated from God. But if we know Jesus, and Jesus died for our sins, that's what we believe when we take the bread – “This is my body, broken for you,” he said. We believe in Jesus who died for us. We believe in him, and if we can believe in him we can believe in ourselves again, we can be made whole. There's a do-over for us, it's a get-over-it part. Communion's about a do-over. You know a do-over, it's a get-over-it moment, a mistake we're allowed to correct, a sin we're allowed to forgive. It's a chance to have a second chance when we need a second chance. Get over it. Does God require us to work to earn God's favor? No. It's not about God forgiving us, it's about believing in Jesus and therefore believing in ourselves and knowing that we are forgiven. Jesus died for our sins. “This is my body, broken for you.” Stop looking back, you are forgiven. That's the reason the snake's important. That's the reason we break the bread. That's what Christianity is about, it's a do-over. It's a get-over-it moment. That's why Communion's important, at least that's the way for many of us that makes sense. It brings Christianity right down to our level. The bread is broken, Jesus has spoken, the snake is silent, God is with us and we are forgiven. We have a do-over. Get over it, fast.

But there's more. There's something held in tension with that, another way to see it. An important way to look at it. Let's hear it from the snake. The snake said it to the man and woman, the snake says it to us. “If you eat of the tree of good and evil you will know the difference between good and evil and be like God.” God wants you to do it, is essentially what the snake said, and maybe the snake was – stay with me, if you can – maybe the snake was telling the truth. Maybe if the man and woman, metaphorically us, maybe if we don't eventually leave Paradise we'll become trapped by it, our paradise becoming our prison. Maybe that story in Genesis isn't just about original sin, maybe it's also about human potential. What if the snake spoke, and when it spoke, it was speaking for God? “Eat the apple. Learn good and evil, and the difference between the two.” And isn't that what Jesus did? Jesus lived that we might come alive. He died that we might be forgiven, but he lived that we might come alive. That's what he did, he freed people from the requirements of the law, didn't he? Challenged people to pick up their pallet and walk, isn't that right? I mean, he opened people's eyes so they could see the things of the spirit.

He healed people on the Sabbath, and there's a rule against that. It's all about new life, it's all about a new covenant in the cup that he gave his life's blood. It's all about a new creation that moves from the way we were to the way we can become. Leave the garden and find your new life, Adam and Eve, men and women. We don't need to live a life that merely exists, where the only job for us is to name things in the garden, putting labels on everything we see. There's more to life than that, there's a new being, moving to perfection, Wesley called it, moved to perfection, moving on to perfection. Jesus lived that we might find new life.

It's like, the customer at the restaurant said to the waiter, "I want a club sandwich. One slice of white bread, one slice of pumpernickel, one whole wheat, toasted medium, with bacon and cheese on the bottom layer, chicken, lettuce, tomato on the top layer, mayonnaise on each layer, then you cut the crusts, you cut the whole thing into four pieces, you take a pickle, you put a pickle on each of the four pieces and a toothpick in each of the four pieces." The waiter walks into the kitchen and yells, "One club sandwich. It's for an architect. I'll be in with the plans."

The snake in the garden tells us, "Get on with it. Be the architect of your life, have a plan. Napoleon Hill said, "Don't wait, the time is never just right, go for it." The cup is the new covenant, my blood. This cup is the new day, it's a new way, it's all about relating to God, who calls us to do a new thing. Who moves us from the static state until we see ourselves as a part of the flow. Craig Davis was right when he said, "You don't want to live your life with your foot on the brake. Because you're not going to go very far, and you're going to burn yourself up." And Shel Silverstein has an important truth in his children's poetry. He says, "Listen to the mustn'ts, child, listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me. Anything can happen, child. Anything can be."

The most important thing about the Gospel is that we call it good news, and the good news is that bad news doesn't have the last word. Sometimes we have to break the rules in order to follow a higher law. There in the garden we discover, it becomes clear to us now, there are some things we're good at, in the garden we see. In the garden we see it. Some things we're good at, maybe we can even be great at doing them. There's a dream we had, we left it a long time ago. In the garden we go back and get that dream and try it again. There's a risk, and we're asked to take the risk, and the destination looms for us, just like it did for Moses. There's a comfort zone, and life is good, but life is boring, you see, and if we move beyond the comfort zone we may fail, but if we stay stuck at where we are, we will always wonder, until we become discomfited in our comfort. The snake told the man and woman, and tells all of us men and women, and Jesus echoes the message in the garden. He lived and spoke his good news so that we might rise about to become the new beings, moving on to perfection Wesley talked about. The message, a part of the message in the garden is not prohibitive, but it invites us to become, to the greatness that is in our latent potential, saying to us of the future, "Get on with it."

If we hear it from the snake, we will hear both – the curse of our disobedience. But through Jesus, who died for our sins, and who gave us a do-over in the broken bread, who

died for our sins so we could get over the past. And we hear it from the snake, the invitation to rise to the greatness that is within us, through Jesus who lived to bring us alive, and the cup of the new covenant so that we can get on with the future. If we hear it from the snake, we will notice both the curse and the blessing of being alive. And we will be left conflicted, and in a state of relative confusion. But it all comes together at the table, when we're offered the broken bread for our brokenness, and the cup of the new covenant for the new being we are called to become. It all comes together at the table, from the past sin, get over it, for the future possibility, get on with it. If it were not for the table – if it were not for the table, we wouldn't be able to understand Genesis, and the story of the snake, and the truth from God, and multiple levels which seem to us to have come from something with a forked tongue.