



The woman answered, “Oh no, we may eat from all the other trees in the garden. It’s just the tree in the *middle* of the garden that we must not eat from, because God said, ‘If you eat from it, or even touch it, you die.’”

The snake said, “*Die?* You won’t die! God knows that as soon as you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like *gods*, knowing good and evil!”

Well, the woman thought the tree was beautiful, and she could see that the fruit was good to eat, so she took one of its fruits and ate, and gave it to the man beside her, and he ate too.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

When they heard the sound of Our God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, the man and the woman hid among the trees.

And Our God called to the man, “Where *are* you?”

“I heard you walking in the garden,” the man said, “and I saw that I was naked, so I hid.”

“Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat from?!”

And the man said, “The woman *you* gave me as a companion—she gave me a fruit from the tree, and I ate.”

And Our God said to the woman, “What is this you have done!”

The woman replied, “The snake tempted me, so I ate.”

So then Our God said to the snake that it was cursed, that it will be lower than cattle and all the wild beasts, that it will crawl on its belly and eat dust every day of its life. And God said that snakes and people will be enemies from here on out.

And to the woman, God said that childbearing will be incredibly painful, and that there will be strife and power struggles between women and men.

And to the man, God said that even the earth will be cursed because the man had eaten from the tree that was forbidden. The man will have to work hard to grow anything more than thorns and thistles from the fields, and at the end of his life, man will return to the earth, just as man was taken from it. “You are dust, and to dust you will return.”

Then Adám, or “Humanity,” named the woman Eve, or “Lifegiver,” because she became the mother of all the living.

Our God made clothes of animal skins for the woman and the man, and dressed them.

And then God decided they shouldn’t eat from the Tree of Life either—which was not something he had said back in Chapter 2! So God drove them from the garden of Eden, and sent them to till the soil from which they had been taken.

Once they were banished, winged sphinxes with fiery, ever-turning swords were placed at the entrance to the garden of Eden to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

## Sermon            The Urge to Question—The Call to Action

*Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

Those sphinxes—I always feel like I’m back in the *Lord of the Rings* with the ending to that story. Or maybe J.R.R. Tolkien was thinking of Genesis? One of the reasons it is good to revisit these texts is that they are everywhere in our culture!

There’s a quintessentially Jewish tradition when it comes to reading and interpreting the Bible. It’s called *midrash*, and it starts with the Rabbis more than 1500 years ago, poring over the ancient texts and coming up with interpretation after interpretation, then laying down all these radically different readings side by side—kind of like the construction of Genesis itself. To read the Bible in “the ‘spirit’ of midrash,” David Stern writes in the *Jewish Study Bible*, takes three things:

1. We need to find ways to *connect* with the text *in this moment*—how does it speak to us now?
2. We’ve got to relish playfulness and encourage the use of the imagination in our reading; and
3. We must delight in multiple, many-voiced interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

In this spirit, says Adele Reinhartz (also in the *Jewish Study Bible*)<sup>6</sup>—Jewish, Christian (and Muslim) women today read the Bible with a “hermeneutics of suspicion,”<sup>7</sup> which means that they seek out and expose the patriarchal and other oppressive biases in the text and the interpretations, biases that come from the culture in which the texts were written *and* from the cultures in which they’ve been interpreted through the centuries. Maybe you noticed in our reading that I couldn’t even include the lines about the woman being “subjugated” to the man and the man “ruling” over the woman—this is simply too hurtful for me and for so many others for too many years! So, too, these women scholars and lay readers root out the remnants of oppression, and then, using their own creative imagination, fill in the gaps in the old text to create new texts—like palimpsests, layering fresh liberating meaning over the old. This way of reading the Bible can change lives!

---

<sup>5</sup> David Stern, “Midrash and Midrashic Interpretation,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “Jewish Women’s Scholarly Writings on the Bible,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*.

<sup>7</sup> Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s term, cited by Reinhartz.

The word *midrash* comes from the Hebrew root meaning “to inquire,” “to search after.” Isn’t that a perfect invitation—especially for use with this text, Genesis Chapter 3, which is all about asking questions? And isn’t midrash—inquiring, searching after—a perfect method for Unitarian Universalists?

Well, sure enough, this fabulous new Unitarian Universalist seminarian, Samantha Wilson, has written her own version of Genesis, Chapter 3, which she calls “The Enlightenment of Eve and Adam and the Snake,” and she has given me permission to retell parts of it.<sup>8</sup> Most of these are her words:

“Now, you may not know this,” Samantha says, “but Eve [is] an incredibly wild woman and she has great intuition about things.... She [knows] the garden ... and she [loves] the animals and the plants and the rivers. She and the snake [are] good friends. They ... [make] discoveries together.... When the snake’s skin [sheds], Eve [helps] pull off the pieces, delighting in cycles and rebirth and change. They [grow] wise in each other’s company.”

In Samantha’s retelling, it’s actually *Eve* who decides on her own to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—because she has that intuition, right? She knows there must be something important about this forbidden tree, and she can see that it’s “beautiful and nourishing.” So, “she [quiets] herself ... and [she chooses] carefully and intentionally....

“Adam [is] standing nearby [and they look at each other. *Do*] *they want to do this together?* She [offers] him a piece ... He [agrees], taking a bite. Even [the] snake [gets] in on the action, slithering to catch the pieces that [fall] from their mouths.”

And then, “their eyes [are] opened. They [notice] one another for the first time—imperfect flesh and blood and wounds, veins, bruises. They [have] never really seen one another, [until] that moment, as wholly human.... They [feel] hungry—for food, for warmth, for one another.”

And then everything happens really quickly: the discovery by God, the curses, God as seamstress so tenderly making them clothes yet still “[shoving] them out of the garden.”

Even so, “the three [walk] and [slither] together as they [make] their way through the gates, unafraid.”

Watching them go, “God [is] sad. Eve and Adam [have] chosen the one thing God [can] never choose ... true life”—what Samantha calls “*struggle-in-flesh*—the bruising, the pain, the struggling for Good in the midst of Evil within

---

<sup>8</sup> Samantha Wilson, “In Times like These (Original Wisdom),” sermon preached at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Santa Rosa, 6 Nov. 2011, and at the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministries—California UU Justice Leaders Training, Camp deBonneville Pines, 20 Nov. 2011. Used with permission. I have shifted verbs to present tense for this sermon.

and beyond each of us. God [can] only look on and wonder what it must be like to be so achingly human, to compromise, to strive, to fail, to make choices.”

And that, Samantha concludes, “is the story, the legacy, of our bold and wise ancestors ... Eve and Adam, the snake and the tree.”

Samantha Wilson calls this the story of “original wisdom,” rather than original sin. And she’s not alone in this interpretation. One of our translators, Stephen Mitchell, says that “*if* there is any fall, it is a fall into adult consciousness, and that is as much a *rise* as a fall.”<sup>9</sup> The ending of Genesis 3 is not a “not a cosmic disaster,” Mitchell says. The authors of Genesis “were comfortable with death”—more than most of us in our culture are—and they “would have been appalled, as Jesus himself would have been, at [what Mitchell calls] the narrowhearted Augustinian interpretation of this story...—that Adam’s transgression was an original, all-inclusive sin and that from then on all human beings were corrupt and damned to hell unless they believed in Christ.”

Friends, this is basically the argument on which our religion is based, from both the Unitarian and the Universalist side. “Original sin” is not the way our forefathers and foremothers have read the story.

You see, if we turn the prism of understanding just a little bit, we see how, in the “intelligence of the story”—as Stephen Mitchell calls it—God puts the darned tree right in the middle of the garden; the story “wants something to go wrong.” There’s an old rule in the theater that if you show a gun in the first act, it’s got to go off by the third act. In this story, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is the “gun,” and real life can’t begin until it “goes off” or rather, until its fruit gets shared.

So, too, in the “intelligence of the story,” God makes Eve, as Adam points out in a line that I had never heard before I studied the text this week. “The woman *you* gave me as a companion offered me the fruit,” Adám says, “so of course I ate. What, I should refuse her?” God makes Eve with her intuition and her curiosity and her ability to choose.

And God makes the snake, too! The snake, Stephen Mitchell reminds us, “in many cultures is a wisdom figure,” not a caricature of evil or temptation. The snake, Mitchell writes in a delicious sentence that I love, “is a figure for the sinuous, ferociously intelligent vital energy—kundalini—that can flow through a human body and be experienced as a great opening to God.” The snake represents an invitation to aliveness. Our own Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School

---

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Mitchell, “On Translating Genesis,” in *Genesis: A New Translation of the Classical Biblical Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

for the Ministry up in Berkeley—Rebecca, in her midrash on this story, calls the snake “a god who calls [us] beyond the circumscribed comforts of the garden.”<sup>10</sup>

And that’s the real point, isn’t it. To be fully alive, we’ve *got to get out of the garden*. What does it mean to be fully alive? Parker lists these actions: “to long to know, to reach for wisdom, to taste and see the bitterness as well as the sweetness, to come to know good and evil.” To take those actions—that’s the holy direction, that’s the direction of the Good or of God. When Eve reaches out for that fruit, Rabbi Lori Forman says, she’s reaching for the very “gifts of life: food, beauty, and wisdom.”<sup>11</sup> Eve, Adam, and the snake are doing what they’re built to do, moving where they’re meant to go.

Here’s why I think it’s so important to look afresh at this creation story on this day. Our teachers—Samantha Wilson, Stephen Mitchell, Rebecca Parker, Lori Forman—show us that the “sin”—the missing the mark, the turning away from the direction of the good and the life-giving—does not lie in Eve’s reaching out for that fruit. No, the sin lies in our *wanting to go back to the garden*, wanting to hunker down in ignorance or isolation, trying to pretend that the trouble in the world doesn’t touch us. We read this story afresh to remember that hard work in this life is not a punishment but rather a necessary companion to nourishment and beauty and wisdom. Hard sweaty work is part of the gift of life on this side of the gates to Eden. It’s part of getting to choose, choosing whether to become co-creators or co-destroyers of this world.

In 1963 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sits in the Birmingham jail for participating in nonviolent civil rights demonstrations. He writes a letter to the white clergy who say he should stop, be patient, don’t stir the waters, let the law and time take their course in ending segregation and racial oppression.<sup>12</sup> Dr. King writes that it looks like “people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will.” People of ill will were choosing, intentionally, to be destroyers of love and justice, not creators—and the clergy, by urging silence or passivity, were complicit in that destruction of people’s lives.

This past week at a PACT clergy lunch—a gathering of the community-organizing faith leaders—we saw charts that show how intentional choices have led us to where we are today: over the past forty years, intentional policies have

---

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Parker, “Not Somewhere Else, But Here: The Struggle for Racial Justice as a Struggle to Inhabit My Country,” in Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, eds., *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (Boston: Skinner House, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Lori Forman, “Bereshit: The Untold Story of Eve,” in Elyse Goldstein, ed., *The Women’s Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail,” in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986).

created the largest gap between the rich and the poor, between the rich and the middle class, that we have ever seen in this country. Now, believe me, I am not saying that all rich people are bad. But it is clear that policymakers have intentionally skewed our economy to benefit that top 1 percent. So, who has been using time well in our lifetimes?

But here's the point, as my colleague Dana Bainbridge says: "If intentional choices got us to this place, then intentional choices can get us out."<sup>13</sup> What choices do *we* want to make on this side of the gates to Eden? No matter how hard it may seem, we can choose to turn our current culture of inequity around.

Human progress, Dr. King says, only comes "through the tireless efforts and persistent work of [people] willing to be co-workers with God"—co-workers in that good, life-giving direction, which is how I understand God. "Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy," King says with words that ring in our ears today: "Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy," to "transcend our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood [and sisterhood]. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice"—and economic injustice, he and we would add—"to the solid rock of human dignity."<sup>14</sup>

We've got work to do on this side of the gates to Eden, the hard sweaty work of real life and of building a better world. Thank God—thank Eve, and Adam, and the snake—thank the authors of those stories and of the midrashim, who make it clear—this hard sweaty work is *exactly* what we're made for. Amen.

---

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Dana Bainbridge, pastor of First Christian Church, in conversation at the PACT (People Acting in Community Together) clergy gathering, 11 Jan. 2012.

<sup>14</sup> King, "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail."