

"BITTERSWEET BEAUTY"

A meditation on Music Sunday by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

As we picture the Garden of Eden, pure beauty is the first response it summons from within us. It evokes birds singing in their plumage; shaded, verdant pathways with new life buzzing in and out. And yes, the unscarred love shared by the first man and first woman. Philip Brooks always called this story "the parable of Eden." And so it is. Someone once said of this budding tale of creation and collapse, "these things never were, but always are." It strikes me how this sumptuous garden and the trash heap where Jesus died--Golgotha or the Skull--are finally the two battlegrounds for the greatest theological assertions.

Recently, I sat with a young woman whose young marriage had just failed. Together we sought to find and make some sense in all of it. She was feeling cosmically picked upon, a feeling that we all get now and again when nothing turns out the way it is supposed to.

Why can't I just be happy? she asked. How does so much hurt creep into life? Why don't things work out any better? Excellent questions, all of them. I knew better than to try any deep answers. I only suggested that in making sense of personal paradise lost, it helps to recall how it slipped away the first time at the dawn of creation; how bliss fled only to leave us with wistful what-could-have-beens. Once exiled from Eden, the man and the woman must fend and struggle. After a promising launch amid incomparable beauty, life becomes messy. And in saying life is messy, I mean much more just losing our car keys. I mean that in the most beautiful garden paradise, the worst happened. And in the most God-forsaken hill outside of Jerusalem, an unimaginable good came to light 3 days later.

So right behind that young woman's queries are the questions the best theologians have burnished with relentless reflection since the dawn of time: why couldn't the serene garden peace and beauty be permanent? Why did God create us capable of doing wrong? Why did God even make us capable of choosing anything? Where did the serpent come from?

Eden is primal in its breathless beauty, and also primal in its excruciating sense of loss. Eden first poses the still unanswered question: can we trust God with our best interests at heart, uppermost and always? Before you answer, think of how our parents attempted to steer us the right way. We wandered off on our own path, only to learn painful lessons, as they pulled out their hair. In this spiritual landscape, logic must fail, but faith wins the day.

Eden is the soul's spring seedbed where bliss, fulfillment and rapture were meant to grow. Eden is a closed casket where dawnd our conscience and our stinging sense of shame. Through all of this, all we can do is trust in the goodness of God, and the goodness of life. Through all of this, we can only hold fast that, compared to the beauty of God's grace, all of the worry, distress, despair, and suffering that ever existed, would scarcely fill a teacup.

Tusting in the goodness of God alone can banish our doubts and fears and reluctance. God is love. And God cannot help but express God's nature in all God says and does.

Maybe pain is no accident, but has been suffused with love to redeem what went wrong. Maybe the glories of reclaiming us from our brokenness are greater than if nothing broke. I'm betting a whole career on that as all of us together risk all of the best parts of our lives. Amen.

Genesis 3.1-15, 20-24 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 from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’ The Lord God said to the serpent,

‘Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.’

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.