

Scripture for Children's Time: Based on Psalm 130:2

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

Scripture before sermon: Genesis 3:8-15

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.'

Sermon: "Choices" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Who are the gardeners out there this morning? If you love getting your hands in the dirt and growing things, would you raise your hand? Ah, that is nice to see.

I am married to a gardener. And here's the thing about this gardener husband of mine. If you're looking for him first thing in the morning or last thing in the evening, Jakey and I have learned exactly where to find him – doing a walk-around. I wonder if any of you do that, even if by a different name? A walk-around is Jon's way of tucking all of his plants in or waking them up in the morning. It is a very slow and deliberate and joy-filled adventure, going around the outside of the lawn, and then eventually making its way over to Jon's new creation of a garden. You will see him bend down and linger. You will see him stand up and look. Jakey sometimes wonders if he will ever come back in.

There are two things about this walk-around that are critically important. The first is that it is always grounded in joy and amazement. Jon loves the beauty of those plants. He loves watching from day to day or morning to evening how those plants have grown. To see plants come out of dormancy in the spring, or when that first flower on the stewartia tree, that now has had three homes, come to life. But it's more than that. He also does it out of a labor of love for those plants. It is his way of checking in, seeing which plants are a little stressed, and might need a splash of water after a hot day. To see which ones find themselves surrounded by weeds and could use some liberation, and which other ones need help in some other way. For Jon to do a walk-around – it's good for him – but it also is very good for the things he goes to check on.

In this story of Genesis that Cathy just beautifully read, we see the story so full of choices in God's Garden. We see choices made. We see blame cast on everyone else. We see excuses

offered, consequences found. But I wonder if before getting to all of that human stuff, choices of creatures both human and serpent, I wonder what would happen if first we focused on the first choice made in the passage.

What was the first choice made in the passage? Well, even before the fear of God, I think the first choice in the passage was God decided to do a walk-around. God decided in the coolness of evening, you notice, to come down to the Garden and walk about.

Now there are two creation stories in the Bible. One where everything comes out of the power of the Word, and it is dramatic and amazing. But I have to admit there are parts of the second one, the one with the more anthropomorphic God, that I just love. Did you notice, Adam and Eve don't see God, they hear the sound of God walking in the Garden. Soft feet on moist ground. The idea, especially on hot days like these, of the evening breeze. A time of the day of comfort and rest and coolness. I love the idea of God calling out in a genuinely questioning mode. Our theology often posits God as all-knowing, and yet in this relationship, in this encounter, they seem to be genuine questions. "Where are you?" "Who told you that you were naked?" I love that it is God's choice to come down and seek and search and look for people.

And what if we focused, in this story of choices, on that choice first? What if this story, rather than coming in the first few pages of Scripture, came in a Gospel? What if it came out of the lips of Jesus saying, "The Kingdom of God is like this?" Because this story is in many ways a stunning parable. There are very few scholars that I know that would claim this text as history. In our own United Church of Christ tradition, we have an important guiding principle, and that is this. That we take Scripture so seriously, we take this story and its meaning for our life so seriously, that we dare not always take it literally.

I wonder if we focused on this choice of the walking around God, would this text have a different associated name with it? Rather than calling this the story of Original Sin, or the Fall of Humanity, or any number of things that have been laden on this text, what if we called it Choices, Human and Divine? What if we called it The God Who Comes to Us? Might we see in a new light our own choices that we're forced to make? Might we see them bathed in the light of God, the One who comes in joy and care, in the beautiful light of evening? Rather than the glaring spotlight of a referee God just waiting for us to slip up so that God can blow the whistle. The lectionary this morning intentionally puts Psalm 130 together with this passage from Genesis.

I wonder if Adam and Eve had had more time to deepen their relationship with God. I wonder if this had happened a few days later in Creation, whether they would have had the truth and depth to see God the way David, the great psalm writer, did. I remember David talked about breaking open his heart that he might be made anew. David kept coming back to God over and over again, talking about making him clean so that he could declare God's praise. You see, David came to know God, not as a scorekeeper or a marker of iniquities, but rather as a bestower of forgiveness.

In the compelling study out of the Methodist tradition, called "Invitation to Genesis," scholar Peter Enns points out a couple of things about this story in the Garden. First, that it's our own Christian imagination that calls it Original Sin. Hebrew Scripture never did, for the wisdom of

that tradition understands that the choices, good and less good, are simply part of the human condition, and in the midst of freedom of choice that God offers us with every breath. There is nothing original about this story, except maybe for the trajectory of God, the Caring One.

There are important pieces to this story that should frame both our lives and how we understand God. Make no mistake about it. This first story in Genesis makes it clear that when we disobey, when we do not follow in the way that God calls us to do, there are consequences. Here in this story, there are literal consequences that God pronounces for the serpent and later the lectionary account doesn't include the ones for us. And yet, what this study shows is a bit about the human trajectory, that unfortunately this choice on this scale leads to much greater and bigger choices in the human condition, ones with far deeper consequences.

Remember what comes right after this story? Well, there would be Cain and Abel, right? And then right after that, there's the uplifting story of Noah and the Ark. And then we get the Tower of Babel. Human choices. And the trajectories on clear display that if it was left up to us and our ways, where we might end up.

But there's another trajectory in this story, one we must see. And that trajectory of how God is understood – it's a God who creates. That's the story we're in. But also tied with that, a God who saves. And more than that, the stories in Genesis don't just point to what God *does*, but rather puts our hearts on who God *is*. What God is willing to do to maintain covenant with us. How God always offers -- in the midst of seeming dead ends, in the midst of consequences we bring upon ourselves -- always new beginnings.

I wonder if Eve and Adam had had the chance to see that trajectory, whether they would have hidden behind those trees, or whether they would have called out. I know that as a parent, I'm disappointed whenever Jakey makes not great choices, but my heart is filled with joy when he tells me about them before I discover them! Right? I wonder if they had really known that God was not a marker of iniquities, whether they would have ended up pointing the finger at each other and at any other thing to place the blame, or whether they would have simply trusted God and come to God, just as this story makes it clear that God comes to humanity. And that is not to say that our choices don't matter. They do, in fact. Choices are what make up our faith. Not just the biggest choices, but every choice.

And we cannot forget how much choice plays a part in our life. Or at least I can't, because of this dude, Jonathan Edwards, looking over my shoulder ever week. It would be in this place where Jonathan Edwards would write one of the most consequential works in Christian writings, "Freedom of the Will." Jonathan Edwards was deeply concerned in the Great Enlightenment about the choices people were making as they came to faith, and whether or not they were real. In his work "Freedom of the Will," written as part of *this* family of Christ, by the way, he wrote about the importance of the two things most central to our story this morning. He said this. Because, remember, Eve and Adam, Adam and Eve, ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That was their transgression. Here is what Edwards writes: "Of all the knowledge that we can ever obtain, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are the most important." When we understand who God is and who we are, and bring those two into the closest of dances, that's where life springs forth."

Later in “Freedom of the Will,” Edwards makes the claim that whatever choices we make are always dictated by whatever our strongest motivation in life is. And so the question is what is most important to us? I wonder if we put our attention most strongly on the motive to follow in God’s way, to obey God, to praise God not just with our lips but with our lives, I imagine that we can live more fully and boldly, and not worry about making mistakes that inevitably must come. For if we are to live boldly, the way Jesus told us to, friends, you and I will not always get it right. And even in our desire to do right, we may sometimes do wrong.

Now Jonathan Edwards was a unique kind of guy. He ended up in his diary writing down a series of things called Resolutions. If you’re not familiar, look them up. He wrote them every week. He came up with 70 of them. One of them says this: “Resolved never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if I expected it would not be more than one hour before I should hear the Last Trumpet.”

Our faith, friends, gives each of us and each of our congregations great freedom to choose. But with that freedom comes great responsibility and great consequence. And I think that our text today can and must be read at the center of our hearts when we think of what kind of people of faith you and I want to be. For at the heart is the incredible wideness of God’s mercy. And I think what it does and can do for us, if we let it, is that it can allow us to live boldly. Because, you see, I don’t think such forgiveness invites us into laziness or benign neglect with the choices we make. But rather it gives us the courage to continue opening ourselves to bigger and deeper ways of trusting God and partnering with God in re-creation. For if God is not a God waiting to blow the whistle to trip us up or kick us out of the game, but rather to pick us up and give us a new beginning, then we are free to try bigger, knowing we may not get it right. Knowing that we may look back and say “What were we thinking?” But do it openly enough to know that if we choose for the sake of the holy, God will not be there to count the ways we have fallen short, but rather to continue to show the trajectory of God’s commitment to partnering with us in the care for all life.

Choices matter. And rather than being afraid, like Edwards talked about, I think that if we are faithful to these scriptures we can take it one step further. That we need truly never be afraid of the choices we make, if we make them out of a sincere desire to love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves.

Thomas Merton gets this point across beautifully. In the amazing prayer that I know so many of you love, he confesses in that prayer that he always strives to do his best even if he has no idea if he is actually doing good at all. But he goes on to say that he believes that his desire to do God’s goodness will lead him down the right road, even if he knows nothing about that road. In other words, our desire to follow in the way of Christ, to follow the commandments of God, will lead us to the right place even if we have no idea where that road is going.

I’ve quoted a lot of people today. But don’t let others just talk about the truths of the choices we make. You’re about to sing. “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” is one of my favorite hymns, but so is “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.” The second verse of that song will put these words on your lips:

For the love of God is broader than the measures of our minds;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we would gladly trust God's word;
And our lives would show thanksgiving for the goodness of our God.

Edwards gets a bad rap for the "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." And yet to read Edwards is to see a man so in love with the beauty of creation, believing that God's beauty is revealed, in fact, in the beauty of creation. I think Edwards saw God as the One who does a walk-around in Creation, one who comes to us for joy of life and one who searches for us in our places of need.

His final Resolution, the 70th one he wrote down, shows the power of his journey, the power of where such freedom of will -- freedom of choice, freedom to take risks for great good -- can lead us. Here is his last Resolution. My goodness, if everyone lived this way today. "Let there be something of benevolence in all that I speak." That is where Edward's road took him, to be a mouthpiece of love, a road to kindness, redemption and possibility.

As we remember these stories today, may that be the way our lives emerge from trust in who our God *is*, and from the resulting way with every breath this life is that we choose. Amen.