

Christmas from Afar

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*The Lord's Day Morning
December 2, 2007*

This sermon is part of the sermon series "Nine Lessons and Carols"

Genesis 3:8-19

Now turn with me if you would to Genesis 3, and we're going to read together...as part of our Advent celebration here at First Presbyterian Church, we're going to read Genesis 3, beginning at verse 8, and through to verse 19. Before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer. Let us pray.

O Lord, we thank You for the Bible. Thank You for the word of God that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We ask again as we read the Scriptures that You would provide illumination, and that we might not just be hearers, but that we might be doers also. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear now the word of God:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, 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?" And 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 of 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 of 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 deceived me, and I ate."

The Lord God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field; on 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 her offspring;
He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

To the woman He said,
"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
In pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

And to Adam He said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
And have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
Cursed is the ground because of you;
In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
And you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread,
Till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken;
For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Amen. And may God bless to us that reading of His holy and inerrant word.

There is a defining moment in the ministry of Jesus. It occurs after His resurrection on the Emmaus road when, you remember, He is speaking to two discouraged, forlorn disciples who have witnessed the betrayal and crucifixion and burial of Jesus. They had invested their lives in Him; they had thought perhaps that He might be the Messiah. But how could this be, when He had been crucified and killed and buried? Remember Jesus catches them up on the Emmaus road, and after a while takes them on that magnificent Bible study. And Luke comments,

"Beginning with Moses and all of the prophets, He expounded to them the things concerning himself."

He was evidently ministering to these two disciples, but He was also of course giving us a key: a key of interpretation; a key that unlocks many passages of the Old Testament; a key that provides for us a way to see what these Old Testament passages are really about. They are about Him. They are about Christ. They are about the fulfillment of this verse, Genesis 3:15:

"I will put enmity between you and the woman [speaking to the serpent], and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

From at least the time of Irenaeus in the second century, this passage has been referred to as the *protoevangelium*, the first gospel promise. In "paradise lost," when Eden is crumbling all around them, guarded now by flaming swords borne by seraphim, God speaks in the midst of it a word of promise, a word of gospel

promise, a word of salvation, a word of redemption.

Here's a little quiz. Fill in the blank: "The reason the Son of God appeared is..."

Well, John tells us the answer. The reason the Son of God appeared is to destroy the works of the devil: that there is this macrocosmic plan and purpose of Jesus to undo what Satan did in the Garden of Eden; to restore sinners to fellowship with Jesus Christ; to bring about a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell.

I want us to look, with the aid of that telescope of Luke 24 (beginning in Moses, beginning in Genesis 3:15, and in all of the prophets, expounding in them the things concerning himself)...I want us to look at this text this morning from three points of view.

First of all, that this passage, verse 15, this passage indicates the inauguration of ...let's call it *antagonism*.

That into the purity, the pristine nature of Eden with Adam and Eve and the garden and the fruit trees, and the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, there enters into this probationary idyllic context antagonism—antagonism between Adam and Eve, antagonism between Eve and the serpent, antagonism between Adam and Eve and God, antagonism between Adam and the ground, antagonism between Eve and the process of childbearing (and perhaps even child-rearing). And on and on it goes, this disruption, this antagonism.

Paul reflects on what happens here. When he writes his epistle to the Romans, he mentions this passage in the opening chapter. He tells us what's going on here, that what happened in the Garden of Eden was that "They exchanged..." It's not yet time for exchanging, but it's soon upon us. You all know what *exchanging* means. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator." That's Paul's Bible study reflection on Genesis 3, that what is going on here is the exchange of the truth of God for a lie.

Satan is introduced in the opening verse of Genesis 3 as "more crafty than any other beast of the field." This story is not an Aesop's fable. It's not to provide an answer as to why snakes have no legs. It's not to provide an answer to why women don't like snakes. It's here to teach us that at the very inception in the Garden of Eden, the first pair — Adam and Eve — exchanged the truth of God for a lie from the father of lies. He comes to them and he says to them (verse 2, end of verse 1): 'Did God actually say 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?''

There were lots of trees in the garden. One imagines what kind of trees they

were...plum trees, almond trees. I saw for the very first time in my life just a few weeks ago a grapefruit tree, with grapefruit hanging from the tree. I know — I'm in my fifties! And I'd never seen a grapefruit tree before. In Wales, grapefruit come in boxes! I knew they grew on trees, I'd just never been up close and personal and touched a grapefruit that was still attached to a tree. One imagines what these trees were. There's a sacramental tree, if you like: the Tree of Life, the tree which epitomizes and symbolizes and is a sign of the promise that God has made. And of all the trees they could make plum jam and apple dessert and whatever. But there is only one tree that they were not allowed to touch. Well, they were not allowed to eat of the fruit of that tree.

And do you see what Satan has done? Do you see the insinuation? “Has God said you may not eat of any of the trees of the garden?” You see what Satan is doing. He's sowing a seed. He's sowing a seed that suggests that the goodness of God, the benevolence of God, the kindness of God in bestowing to them the whole extent of Eden and beyond, with only one scruple.... Satan is sowing the seed that the benevolence of God and the goodness of God and the kindness of God and the generosity of God is miserly, that God only gives reluctantly.

And Eve buys it. Adam shamefully says nothing, but Eve has the wool pulled over her eyes, and she believes the lie that if she eats of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, she will receive not the curse that God has threatened, namely death, but she will receive life and blessing and God-like qualities. And she has believed the lie. And into Eden has come antagonism and discord, and the culture of blame-shifting. ‘It's the woman that You gave me; it's the serpent that spoke to me’ — the culture of accusation, the culture of discord and strife and opposition of man against woman, of man against his environment, of man against God. And what we have here in embryonic form is the seedbed out of which has grown the antagonism and hostility and discord and strife that all of us know only too well. To read the headlines on the news and in our newspapers, and to live and move in this world (and we only need to look into our own hearts), and here it is here in Genesis 3:15. This passage indicates the inauguration of antagonism.

Secondly, this passage indicates the inauguration — and let me put it this way — of initial uncertainty.

It inaugurates a promise, but the promise is uncertain. The promise isn't specific. It's a general promise that enmity will be set between you (the serpent) and between you (the woman), and between your offspring and her offspring.

Now, when you look at verse 15, “your offspring” and “her offspring” ...many...plural. You might expect the text to say, ‘And *they* shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise *their* heel.’ But all of a sudden it moves from the plural “the seeds”, as of many, to “the seed,” as of one.

Some of you will remember how Paul plays on that in his epistle to the Galatians, that there's a promise of seed, as of many, but there's also a thread of promise of seed (as of one).

Who is this seed? What will this seed of the woman be like? What form will he take? I wonder...when Eve gave birth to her firstborn son, Cain, I wonder what she thought. They named him Cain, which in Hebrew sounds like the verb *brought forth*. She will bring forth. And what will she bring forth? A seed that will crush the head of Satan. So she calls him *brought forth*, as of the Lord; that he is God's gift; that in a sense he may well be the fulfillment of this promise. I wonder didn't she think that as she nursed him, as she watched him grow as a little boy. But we know this is not true. It's one of the massive tragedies in the Scriptures, that the firstborn son of Adam and Eve was not the seed of the woman, but the seed of the serpent. He was a murderer. He killed his brother. And right in the very embryonic stage of the history and plan of redemption, there's now this uncertainty: If not Cain, then who? Who will be the seed of the woman? Who will be the one who will crush the head of Satan?

Peter seems to reflect on it a little, don't you think, when he writes his first epistle? He says in the opening chapter about the Old Testament prophets that they were constantly looking, and they prophesied about the grace of God that was to come; that they searched and inquired carefully, diligently as to the fulfillment of the prophecies that God had made in the Scriptures. Who will this seed be? And what form will he take? Even when we know the answer.... And what a wonderful thing Christmas is, because it says to us that we know the answer. We know the answer to this predicament; we know the answer to the problem of sin; we know the answer to the problem of alienation between us and God. We know the answer to the way to placate the wrath of God's holiness. We know the answer to the question, "How can I stand on the Day of Judgment and be acquitted?" And the answer to all of those questions is "Jesus."

But if you were living in the Old Testament, there'd be this uncertainty. Was it this king of Judah? Was it this one who sat on a throne in Jerusalem? Was it perhaps this prophet, or the son of this prophet?

This text, this passage indicates the inauguration of antagonism, but this passage indicates the inauguration of a promise that at first is uncertain as to the nature of its fulfillment.

But thirdly, this passage indicates the inauguration of final and complete victory.

"I will put enmity between you and the woman." Do you remember when Paul says in Galatians 4:4, "...when the fullness of time had come"? Now sometimes

commentators will comment on that glorious verse and they'll talk about the Roman Empire and the *lingua franca* one language which made it easy for the gospel to spread, and the Roman roads and so on and so on, but I don't think that is what Paul is initially thinking about.

"When the fullness of the time had come...." Do you remember the context of those words?

"When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...."

Well, of course He was born of a woman! How else would He be born? Perhaps Paul is putting it that way because of the peculiar way that He was born, that He was born of a virgin. But I rather think that what Paul has in mind is Genesis 3:15—that He was born of the woman; He was the seed of the woman. He was the fulfillment of this first gospel promise.

Do you remember in Jesus' ministry the first miracle that He did, in Cana? At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, when He turned those water pots into wine? You remember His mother Mary comes to Him and she's all upset because the wine has run out. And you remember what Jesus says to her? "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" Now, all you Southern girls know that that's not the way to speak to a lady. You don't call your mother "woman"—not and survive it! What is Jesus doing when He says, "Woman, what have I to do with you?" He's pointing, do you see, to this passage. And He's saying 'I come, do you understand, for something far greater than turning water pots into wine.' He does that out of His grace, and John says that it was a manifestation of His glory. But over and above that, He was the seed of the woman. He'd come to destroy the works of the devil.

Do you remember in John 14, right at the end of John 14 in the upper room discourse, the chapter ends by saying...Jesus is saying to His disciples, "Rise, let us go." The problem is they don't rise for another three chapters! It's the end of chapter 17 before they rise and move out to the Garden of Gethsemane, and commentators fall all over themselves trying to work out why does Jesus say "Rise" at the end of chapter 14. Actually, in the context there's an illuminating clue as to what He's saying:

"I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on Me; but I do what My Father has commanded Me [unlike Adam] so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go."

And it seems to be — and the word itself has military connotations — it seems to be that Jesus is saying not, "Rise, let's go into the Garden of Gethsemane"; but, 'Rise to arms, rise to action, because this is why I have come; because the prince of this world is near.' That Jesus Christ has come in order to destroy the works of the devil.

And in Caesarea Philippi Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against Me." He had spoken for the first time in a clear fashion that He must needs go to Jerusalem, and there to be betrayed and to be crucified, and to be buried. And do you remember the response of the Apostle Peter? He uttered two words that cannot go together: "Never, Lord...never, Lord." And you know, when you read that passage it looks as though he touched a raw nerve in Jesus. Because I think at that moment Jesus felt the power of Satan as perhaps He had never felt it before. The temptation to get for himself the crown without the cross must have been potentially overwhelming. And do you remember what He said to Peter? "Get thee behind me, Satan...get thee behind Me, Satan."

This text helps us to understand the nature of the work of Christ in its multifaceted dimension, and at least a part of why Jesus had come into the world was to destroy and undo that which Satan did in paradise, by regaining paradise from paradise lost.

And as you move in the Bible to the end, in those closing chapters of the book of Revelation, what is it you see? One after another: Babylon, the city that is opposed to the city of God; Babylon is destroyed; the beast of the earth and the beast of the sea, they are destroyed; and Satan himself is cast into the lake of fire. And...

"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth its successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moon shall wax and wane no more."

It speaks of glorious victory. We are not in that complete victory yet, those of us who are believers, those of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ. We are still in this world. There is still a battle. There is still a war. There is still a fight, and we must put on the whole armor of God.

I was reminding the group that comes on Wednesday for the Bunyan studies of Great-heart's words to Mr. Valiant-for-truth, when he inspected his sword. And he looked at that sword and he said, "'Tis a right Jerusalem blade." It is a figure, of course, of the Bible. And until we get to glory, we must wield that sword against, to be sure, an enemy whose doom is certain, but whose malevolence is no less for that.

But you know, one thing I want to leave with you this morning from this text is that our salvation, yours and mine, who are trusting in Jesus Christ...you know, it's not an afterthought. It's not a Johnny-come-lately thing. Right there in the Garden of Eden itself (and Scripture tells us from before the foundation of the world), He had set His love upon us. That's the determination of God. That's the

purpose of God in all of history—Old Testament history, New Testament history, our history, future history. It's about the triumph of the Lamb. It's about the reign of King Jesus. May God bless it to us as we approach this Advent season. And may we rejoice in full assurance of the victory that Christ has gained for those who trust Him.

Let's sing together in closing one of our favorite Christmas carols, 195—*Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come.*

[Congregation sings.]

Now receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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