

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 9 MARCH 2014
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Genesis 2: 15 – 17, 3: 1 – 7; Matthew 4: 1 – 11

“And They knew that they were Naked”

Even more than on other texts, preaching on Genesis 2 will always be imperfect. The text, the issues, they are just too complex and far reaching for anybody to do them justice or address them satisfactorily. And perhaps, on some level, that is just what it is all about. Imperfection.

Preaching on this text, one could get into heavy exegesis or high academics, get into Church history, Systematic Theology or all sorts of other deep and worthwhile things that would keep our minds occupied and our hearts out of trouble. We could think about original sin and the question of how evil came into the world and why. I could explain to you why this text is not about Eve being the root of all evil, and it is not about Adam, the guy who did not quite know how to refuse an apple. We could talk about the nature of snakes: Are they evil by nature or was this particular snake a victim of more sinister powers? We could think about death and what if it would

never happen and life would go on forever. There are a myriad of philosophical questions we could consider and be sure that what we said would leave us fairly safe, but also fairly cold.

Knowing how evil entered the world is not going to change our lives you see, nor is pondering exactly how the relationship between Adam and Eve worked, and whose fault it really was that they were kicked out of the garden. Determining the nature of the snake also wouldn't matter much to us, even if we decided it was an animal that was particularly suited to present us with devilish temptations. Even talking about death would probably, in the end, leave us comparatively cold. We are all going to die, no matter what the answer to the philosophical "what if" question.

No, over the centuries, enough has been said on these aspects of the text, and if you are really interested it would be easy to go up to the theological library at Melbourne Uni and keep yourself occupied for quite a while.

We're not here to get answers to philosophical questions. We are here to relate the facts of our lives to God and His grace and love. We are here to listen to scripture and connect it to our day-to-day lives in such a way that it will make a difference when we leave this Church. We are here to listen, open ourselves up to God, and be touched at an existential, rather than an academic or philosophical level.

What we should ask is: What does this story have to do with me, today, here in North Balwyn, in the situation I find myself in now, in the life I am living, in the history that lies behind me, in the future I see ahead of me? Where does the story speak to me, and where does it bring me face to face with God and his purposes?

Thinking about that question in relation to this, the story of a woman who more or less walked into a murder scene came to mind. She took a long time to talk about the experience, because, as she said, "once I tell you and you know, it will be impossible for you to not know and for me to un-tell. You'll be burdened with what I am burdened with and I am not sure I want to do that to you." And she was right. The



gruesome details still make the hairs on my arms stand on end and a cold shiver ripple down my back when I think about it. The house where it happened, in an ordinary, middle of the road, suburban street, never looked the same again, nor did any of the similar houses in the same neighbourhood. Knowing what she knew changed the way I looked at the world, as it had for her.

A quite extreme example, I know, but I wonder if anything has ever happened in your lives where you feel, in hindsight, that you lost your innocence. Where you remember your eyes were opened and you suddenly saw yourself and the world around you in a completely different light. When you realised, for the first time, just how naked and imperfect you and me and the world around us is.

The story of the murder made me realise that people really do these things to one another. People can revert to horrible, violent actions when things get out of control. And that those people could be living next door, with 2 children and a dog and an all-wheel drive in the driveway.

Eve eats the apple and of course, that is a choice rather than her walking into something unawares. She does something that God has expressly forbidden her to do. So in her case, disobedience comes into the equation, making things even worse, because the loss of innocence is one of her own making. She is not an unsuspecting victim, she is a responsible adult making the wrong choices, failing somebody who loves her, betraying trust, not living up to expectations. But the effect is much the same.

Suddenly she becomes aware, aware of her nakedness, aware of her infirmity, her limitations. Not only is it the fragility of the human race that she is confronted with, it is her own ability to do wrong and make wrong decisions, to fail, which in many ways is worse than walking into an horrific murder scene. At least then it is somebody else who has done it.

Some of us will know exactly how Eve felt when she realised she should not have gone beyond the boundaries that God had set, when she realised there was a reason for them being there, and that she can't rewind what she has done. Once you know, once you're aware, once you've seen the ugly side of life, once you've stuffed up badly and realised you have, there is no way back!

She shares the apple, she shares her knowledge with Adam. Because you see, finding yourself suddenly vulnerable and naked, guilty and lacking, also makes one very lonely. Male or female. Guilt, betrayal, failure, a secret that is difficult to bear alone. Adam would have done no different had he been the first one on the scene, I am sure.

And then God comes to walk with them in the garden, as he is used to doing. And they hide.

We don't want to know we are vulnerable, fallible, imperfect human beings. We don't want it known that we do stupid, silly things sometimes, that we screw up, badly, that we are naked and pathetic when we are at our worst. We hide. We hide behind excuses, we hide behind our pride, we pretend there is nothing wrong, we go on and ignore God who has come to walk with us, because we can't bear to show ourselves in the light of his presence. We all do that, at one time or another, don't we?

And what does God do? He calls and comes to find them, and gently asks what the matter is, reaching out to re-establish the relationship, to re-connect with his mirror image.

And what happens? Man starts to pass the buck around and woman follows suit, and passes it on to the snake and the snake bites the dust and things go from bad to worse. It's what happens, isn't it? We don't want to know about our own imperfections, so we blame someone else, and that someone else blames something else, and we get into a mess.

Have you ever noticed, properly paid attention, to what God then does? He does not kill them, even though the story is supposed to be about death entering the world. He sews them clothes to cover their nakedness. He confronts them with their shortcomings, brings to light what they have been trying to hide,

and they find themselves outside the garden, because the garden is no longer the place they belong. They are no longer children, they have grown up to a life where the choices they make can cause pain and hurt, to a life where the choices they make have consequences, serious consequences, that are not always good. God does not kill them however, and he does not turn His back on them. Their life is forever changed. What they know cannot be made un-known, but God keeps calling: Where are you? And comes looking for them, wanting to walk at their side.

In Jesus Christ, the new Adam comes to light. Here we are presented with a man who knows all the temptations and difficulties of human life.

The man who has been dunked in the river Jordan with people that came to repent wrong choices in their lives, and has risen to the voice of God recognising him as his Son.

The man who is then taken by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tested. There he is attacked by the devil and his demons, but he refuses to give in. He walks with God, and God walks with him, and not for a moment do either of them let go. In Him, life as it was in the garden is lived out in the world outside the garden, and the gap of alienation between what is of God and what is of this world is closed. In Him, God embraces human life as it is outside the garden, in all its nakedness and horror, and stays with it through to the very bitter end.

And even that bitter end does not keep God from reaching out, from covering our misdeeds and failures with the cloth of His love and grace, from coming close and holding us, accepting us, redeeming us, even where we have difficulty accepting ourselves and letting ourselves be liberated by His redemption. It is in those life-changing events when suddenly the nakedness of our own, or our collective, existence reveals itself to us, where God comes in and does not let go. It is in those moments when we find ourselves outside the garden, alone, lonely, cold, scared, small and cowering, where God does not let go and comes to be right there with us.

It is there that Jesus comes, to close the gap between life in the garden and life outside it, and re-connects the two.

God does not leave us alone in our struggle, in our lives made of vulnerable and painful dust, but comes and stays with us, showing us that the devil can be resisted. God stays with us in a life that has faced the bare and unpleasant facts of life outside the garden, that has been through pain and hurt and betrayal, and has become familiar with all the inequities that can be visited upon us as human beings. In a life that has known nakedness and the limitations and imperfections of human existence; that from such a life, brought to a miserable death, God can start a new creation, bring forth a new humanity, call out "where are you" and be answered from beyond the grave.

God has not left us, God calls us to make the right choices and resist the devil. If we can't, we will have to bear the consequences, but even then, God will be with us and bring forth life out of death. Amen.