

The God-Shaped Hole

Gen. 2:15-7, 3:1-7; Matt. 4:1-11

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“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.”

I want you to do me a favor. This week, I want you to look for this story. I want you to keep your eyes open and see if you can find it playing out right in front of you. Don't worry, it shouldn't be that hard to spot. With little effort you'll most likely see it in the headlines of the paper or in the lead story of the evening news. But I want you to look a little harder, and more honestly, and see where it plays out at work or school, home, or church.

To tell you the truth, that won't be that hard either. Because this story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent? Turns out it's our story, and though it's hard to admit, we know it as well as any story we've ever heard.

But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. It might help to listen more closely to the passage from Genesis we just heard. So, a couple of things right up front about what this story is *not* about:

First, this story is not about Eve. Did you notice that Adam is with her all along? Who knows why he just stands there, silent. Contrary to popular belief, Adam and Eve go into this thing together.

Second, the story isn't about deception. Again, despite our popular memory of the events described, the serpent doesn't deceive Adam and Eve; rather, it gives them additional information. Information, actually, that turns out to be true. When they eat, they do not die; they do know good, evil, and all manner of things in between; and they do become more like God.

Third, and most importantly, this story isn't about ambition or rebellion or a lust for power, not really. Adam and Eve are attracted mainly by the beauty of the fruit and by the prospect of being wise, of knowing all things.

So what *is* this story about? It's about mistrust. It's about a broken relationship. It's about the search for a meaningful identity. And perhaps more than anything, it's about holes and how we fill them.

The interesting thing about the Genesis story of creation is that while the Bible clearly says that God pronounced all things good, including humankind in the persons of Adam and Eve, it nowhere says that these humans were perfect or complete. Indeed, they are drawn into intimate relationship with each other, with creation, and with God precisely because they are incomplete. On their own, that is, they are blessed, holy, and good, yet also in need, even dependent, unable to meet all their needs on their own.

Maybe that's why God forbids them to eat that fruit. The Bible doesn't specify God's motive, and so we can only guess. But I wonder if God's command was in-

tended to remind them that there are limits, even for those created as the pinnacle of God's good creation. To remind them of their need, of their want. To remind them, that is, that while they are wonderful and beautiful and blessed, nevertheless they will always experience a gap, even carry around with them a hole.

To describe human life as living with a sense of incompleteness, let alone having a hole deep, deep inside, can sound rather negative. But what if we put it this way: we were created for each other. We are social beings, created for relationship, and so that incompleteness is filled when we are connected meaningfully to others. That hole is what shapes each of us, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, so that we can be fitted together with others to create something more beautiful than we could be on our own.

So there it is: each of us has a gap, a deep-seated need, a hole that can only be filled through relationship. Which is what this story is about. Adam and Eve are created for relationship. Relationship with each other. Relationship with other species of the creation. And, most fully, relationship with God—God the one who created them, God the one who invites them to be co-creators in the naming and taming of all living things, God the one who offers them identity, purpose, and mission.

Which brings us back to the serpent. As we've already noticed, the serpent doesn't lie to Adam and Eve; rather, the serpent introduces uncertainty and mistrust. Has God told them all things? Has God spoken truly? Is there more to life than what God has offered? Do they really need God to fashion a meaningful identity or meet every need? Are there other ways, finally, to fill the ache of incompleteness that is part and parcel of being human?

And in doing so the serpent draws attention to the hole—that sense of incompleteness—that each of them has carried around since the beginning but up to this point maybe didn't even notice. That hole, previously filled by their relationship with and trust in each other and God, suddenly feels both large and poignant, and it demands to be filled. Except now merely relating and trusting doesn't seem to do it; now they need to own, to possess, to have something for themselves.

And so there it is—the fruit God forbade, just hanging there, waiting, suddenly so attractive and apparently just the right size to fill the distinct and painful gap they'd hardly noticed before. *Goodness*, they must say to themselves, *but the hole I have is shaped just like that fruit, and if I eat it, I'll never ache with incompleteness again.* But it doesn't work out that way, not for them, not for us. The ache doesn't go away, no matter how much we accomplish, earn, or buy. It only grows bigger, more insatiable, persistent, and demanding.

Which is, of course, why it will be so easy for us to spot this story this week, every week. There are so, so many things out there that offer themselves as perfectly shaped to fill the holes we carry, and we, like our great-grandparents Adam and Eve, will have a very hard time resisting.

Now, of course there were two stories read this morning, and the other was about holes, too. For Jesus, because he was truly human as well as divine, also had a hole. He too was in need, meant for relationship, destined to be joined to others. But he doesn't give in to the temptation to fill that need with the bread or the bravado or the power that the tempter offers, because he already knows the true measure of that hole. Just before this scene, you see, Jesus had been baptized, and he had heard words perfectly shaped to fill the hole and soothe the ache that every human heart bears:

“This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

What Jesus discovered at the River Jordan, you see, is what Adam and Eve somehow missed: that the holes with which we are born are God-shaped, which is maybe why we have them in the first place—to draw us away from confusing the creation with the Creator, and in this way bring us back into relationship with the God who has created, blessed, and baptized us. And so when tested in the wilderness, Jesus falls back on that relationship, refusing the dream that he might establish himself on his own, that he might secure or own his identity and destiny. He knows that to be human is to be incomplete, to be, that is, created for relationship, to find completeness as we are drawn together in the love and life God offers. And so when the Tempter seeks to undermine his identity and exploit his human need, Jesus seeks refuge in the mercy of God, affirming *who* he is by remembering *whose* he is.

Now I'll be honest, it's tempting at this point to treat this story like one more piece of religious good advice, the spiritual equivalent of an Aesop's fable. It's tempting, that is, to urge you to be just like Jesus: to resist the fruit hanging all around and seek ye first the kingdom of God. And that wouldn't be bad advice, frankly, but for one thing: it won't work. Oh, we'd try, and maybe do okay for a while, but sooner or later we'd relent, giving up and giving in, because truth be told, the kingdom of God seems so far away and that seemingly perfectly shaped iPhone, or car, or pair of shoes or laptop, or renovated bathroom or home in Arizona or whatever—it's hanging right there in front us, enticing us to reach out and grab it, taking and tasting the sour apple that never satisfies but only magnifies our need. Urging you to be like Jesus doesn't work, you see, because if we look in the mirror, we have to admit that we bear a closer family resemblance to Adam and Eve than we do to Jesus.

So instead I'll ask you to do me another favor. After you've looked for the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent this week, come back to this place of worship, to your church, and follow this other story. At it turns out, the story read and preached and sung in your congregation is not about what *we* should do but instead about what *God* has done for us in Jesus.

Matthew gives us a clue. Right near the end of this passage, Matthew tells us that the devil left Jesus. He was not defeated, that is, but left, biding his time for another opportunity. Matthew knows, you see, that this contest isn't over. Jesus has won this round, has refused to give into the lie that we can fill our need on our own. And so defeated in his attempt to seduce Jesus, the Tempter flees only to return, this time armed with swords and a company of soldiers, in order to kill the One he could not tempt. And so they grab Jesus, accuse him, try him, and hang him on a cross.

And on the cross, do you know what you'll hear if you watch and listen closely? The same thing you heard at your baptism: “You are my child, the beloved, and with you I am well pleased.” Jesus goes to the cross, you see, not to take our punishment or satisfy the wrath of an angry God, but to share with us, the confused and insecure children of Adam and Eve, the good news that God loves you, and forgives you, and accepts you just as you are. And that news, that surprising, scandalous, unexpected news of God's unfailing love, fills the hole, closes the gap, and soothes the ache of our desperate and wayward hearts.

This is what Lent is all about. Lent isn't, finally, about giving up things or wearing sack cloth and ashes. Those things and all the other elements of Lent are to invite us to take notice, to make room to see what matters, to help us discern between good fruit

and sour. Lent, finally, is forty days set aside so that we can, if we choose, recognize just how much stuff in our lives we've been sold as good fruit and name them for what they are—sour apples, even fakes and frauds—and then to come running to the cross to receive the food of eternal life.

Don't get me wrong. In the end, it's not the stuff. The stuff we buy can often help us get all manner of things done. But the stuff we buy can't create meaning, can't grant us purpose and identity, can't fill the hole deep inside us. Only God can do that. And the good news is that in Jesus, God has done that. And the cross to which Jesus journeys shows us just how far God is willing to go to make sure we know that.

“When they saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it was to be desired, they took of its fruit and ate.”

“In the night when he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my body, given for you.’”

And so go and look, and then come back, and while you're coming, bring a friend, because we've all got God-shaped holes, and Jesus has promised to fill them, all of them, each and every one.