

I

The summer after my first year of seminary, I was privileged to serve an internship under the guidance of a wise and seasoned pastor. One Sunday morning after worship, I stood in the narthex next to the pastor greeting parishioners as they filed out of the sanctuary, and along came one of the matriarchs of the church, a very kind woman in her 70s named Mrs. Phillips.¹ I observed that Mrs. Phillips was walking with crutches, and I would have bet my bottom dollar that the previous Sunday, she'd not had those crutches.

So in my best pastoral posture, I smiled at her, took her hand in both of mine, and said, "Oh, my goodness, Mrs. Phillips, what happened?"

And up to that point, I think I was doing just fine. But then, I thought I'd get cute. I thought, "you know, I'm getting pretty good at this pastoring thing, and I'm a pretty funny guy, and I remember something my old football coach used to say when football players were on crutches."

And so before she could answer, I winked at her and said, "I guess we're going to have to start calling call you 'Skipper.'"

The smile disappeared instantly from her face, and she looked me straight in the eye, and she said, "Ryan, I had polio when I was a little girl, and I've been on these crutches ever since."

I just stood there, slack jawed. I stand about 6'5", but I distinctly remember wishing that the floor would open beneath my feet and just and swallow me whole. Not knowing what else to say, I said, "Well, have a nice afternoon," and Mrs. Phillips and her husband walked out the door.

How could I have been so stupid? How could I have been so insensitive? Yes, I wasn't trying to intentionally hurt her feelings, and yes, I was young and inexperienced, but still, I should have known better. And in the days that followed, I was overcome by powerful feelings of guilt and shame. I wanted to stay in bed, pull the covers over my head, and never come out again.

The postscript to this story is that the following week, Mrs. Phillips and her husband were at church for Wednesday night supper. I summoned up all the courage I could find and made my way to her. I said, "Mrs. Phillips, I'm an idiot."

And she said, "I know that. But you learned something, didn't you?"

And I said, "Yes, ma'am, I sure did."

¹ With respect and pastoral sensitivity, I have given her a pseudonym. I will never forget her name or the lessons she taught me!

And she said, “Good, that’s what you’re here for.”

And in that short exchange with Mrs. Phillips, I learned that sin, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation are not just fancy words in a theology textbook.

II

We’ve all been there, haven’t we? We’ve all said or done something that has caused us such intense feelings of guilt and shame that we’ve just wanted to curl up into a tight little ball and disappear.

That’s part of the complexity and perplexity of our human nature. Even though we want to be good, just, moral beings, we are capable of causing pain, sowing chaos, and fomenting destruction.

And when that happens, when we fail to be the good, just, moral beings that we set out to be, we have a tendency to try to cover it up, to pretend like it never happened, or to make excuses. In short, when we experience the guilt and shame that naturally comes when we’ve failed to be the people we set out to be, our first inclination is to run and hide.

III

And that brings us to our story for today. This Fall, we’re going to be doing something of a broad overview of the Hebrew Scriptures, also called the Old Testament. We won’t be hitting every verse, or even every book, but from now until Christmas, we’re going to be taking something of a high-altitude flight over some of the major themes and stories of the Old Testament.

Our story today comes from a section of the book of Genesis that bible scholars call the “pre-history” narratives. And as we read texts like these, it’s important to remember that for us, the bible is not a biology or geology or a history book, although certainly it contains ancient Near Eastern worldviews on all of those subjects. But for us, the bible is a theology book. It’s God’s way of telling us about who God is, about who we are, and about the nature of our human condition.

And so through that lens, then, let us listen for a Word from God from the Book of Genesis, with selected verses from chapter 2 and then chapter 3 verses 1 through 10. Listen now for a Word from God.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; 6 but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— 7 then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3 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?'" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 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.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 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. 7 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.

8 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. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

This is the Word of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I wonder – when did God first become aware that the man and the woman had sinned? Was it only when God went for an evening stroll through the garden and noticed that the humans were nowhere to be found – sort of like a parent who notices that the children have suddenly become scarce and the house is too quiet and becomes suspicious?

I don't think so. I think God knew that the man and the woman had failed to be the people that God had hoped they would be the very moment that they bit into the fruit. After all, this is the God who created the very heavens and the earth.

I think when God went for an evening stroll through the garden, God already knew everything that had transpired – all of it. When God called out to the man and the woman, "Where are you?" I think God already knew exactly where they were.

But that didn't stop the man and the woman from trying to hide all the same. I heard you coming, said the man. I was afraid of you, and I hid myself.

I wonder which broke God's heart more – the fact that the woman and the man had failed to be the people that God hoped they would be, or that in their fear, in their

guilt and shame, they tried to hide themselves from the God who had created them, who had provided for their every need, who went seeking them out, even when God already knew what they had done?

When the breach happened, who was the first party to pull away? Was it God? Or was it the humans?

God didn't strike the man and woman dead on the spot the moment the fruit touched their lips. God didn't immediately banish them from the garden. It wasn't God who first pulled away from the humans. In point of fact, it was God who sought them out. But it was the humans who pulled away from God in their guilt and fear and shame.

I heard you coming. I was afraid. And I hid myself.

IV

My friend, God knows all about you. The good. The bad. And the ugly. After all, God is the one who made you. God is the one who provides for your every basic need – the air in your lungs and the blood in your veins even at this very moment.

There is nothing that you have said and nothing that you have done that God hasn't witnessed. You may have a deep, dark secret that you've never confessed to another living soul, not even your spouse or your best friend. But God knows all about it. God saw and heard it all.

And yes, your sin breaks God's heart. When you fail to be the human that God created and called you to be, yes, that breaks God's heart. But I think what breaks God's heart even more is when you try to run and hide from God. I think what breaks God's heart even more is when you let the fear and the guilt and the shame continue to separate you from God.

God knows all about you. The good. The bad. And the ugly. And God loves you anyway, so much so that even knowing all about you, God would rather go to the cross for you than live without you.

As you know, God has blessed me with three sons. If it came right down to it, I know in my bones that I wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice my life if it meant I could save theirs.

But the gospel says that God so loves you, and God so loves me, and God so loves those people on the street out there, and God so loves those people on the other side of the earth, that God gave God's only Son for us, *even though God knows all about us*.

So my friend, there is no need to be afraid of or to hide from God. There is no need to let the fear and the guilt and the shame control your life. Because of the life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus, there is no sin of yours that is beyond God's forgiving. There is no shame of yours that is beyond God's redeeming. There is no death of yours that is beyond God's resurrecting.

V

But this story about the garden is not just a story about something that happened to someone somewhere else a long time ago. It's not just a story about you and me as individuals. It's also a story about all of us, together.

But in this culture, we tend to think about sin and its effects as an individual problem. We like to think of ourselves as independent free agents, which means, among other things, that we are only responsible for ourselves and our individual choices, and we alone should receive the blessings or suffer the consequences of those choices.

But from these earliest pages of the bible, we learn that we were made to live together, in community. "It is not good that the man should be alone," said God. We were made to live together. As a wise preacher from Georgia once said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."²

And so this story isn't just about one woman or one man's bad choices a long time ago in a place far away. It's a story about us, here and now, and our collective struggle to be the faithful, just, and moral people that God has created and called us to be.

Because we don't just sin as independent, autonomous individuals. Whole communities have been known to disobey and try to run away and hide from God. Whole congregations have been known to disobey and try to run away and hide from God. Whole nations have been known to disobey and to try to run away and hide from God.

But here's the thing. There is no sin that has happened that God doesn't already know all about. God sees and hears all of it. As 1 John 1:8 says, "If we say that we have not sinned, we deceive only ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

These are difficult days for our nation, certainly the most difficult I've experienced in my lifetime. We are having some hard national conversations about some basic, fundamental issues, like justice, truth, fairness. Two hundred and forty-four years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, asserting that all people were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, we are still grappling with the after-effects of America's original sin of racism.

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Letter from Birmingham Jail," 16 Apr 1963, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html, accessed September 10, 2020.

It's enough to make anyone want to run and hide. It's enough to make us want to stay in bed and pull the covers over our heads and wait for better days.

But we need not be afraid. We need not hide from God, as if we could.

We need not be afraid, for God is on the move, strolling through the garden in the cool of the evening breeze calling, "Where are you? Don't pull away from me. Don't pull away from each other. Come on out and let's talk about it."

We need not be afraid, for God is on the move, strolling through the garden in the cool of the evening breeze, calling out, "What do I require of you, but that you do justice, that you love kindness, and walk humbly with me?"³

We need not be afraid, for God is on the move, strolling through the garden in the cool of the evening breeze, despite all our efforts to run away and hide from God, despite all our efforts to pull away from God and from each other, God is on the move.

Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.⁴

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Micah 6:6-8

⁴ "A Brief Statement of Faith," *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part 1* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016), 11.3