

# Future Present

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
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## **Genesis 3:1-13**

The snake was shrewder than all the animals the LORD God made. And it said to the woman, “Even though God said, ‘You are not to eat from all the trees in the garden — ’” “We eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman said to the snake. “But fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden — God said, ‘You are not to eat any of that and you are not to touch it or you will die.’” And the snake said to the woman, “You’re not going to die! God knows that when you eat any of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.”

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom. And she took some of its fruit, and she ate. She also gave some to her man, who was with her, and he ate. And the eyes of both of them were opened. And they realized they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together. And they made coverings for themselves.

And they heard the voice of the LORD God, who was walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his woman hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. And the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?” And he answered, “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid.” And he said, “Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree I commanded you not to eat?” And the man said, “The woman you gave me — she gave me [fruit] from the tree, and I ate. And the LORD God said to the woman, What have you done?” And the woman said, “The snake tricked me, and I ate.”

## **Our World Belongs to God 25/26**

As the second Adam  
Jesus chose the path we had rejected.  
In his baptism and temptations,  
teaching and miracles,  
battles with demons and friendships with sinners,  
Jesus lived a full and righteous human life before us.  
As God’s true Son,  
he lovingly obeyed the Father  
and made present in deed and word  
the coming rule of God.

## **Children’s Story**

Sally Sinclair was almost seven years old. And she was waiting for her birthday. It seemed like it would never come.

Then her birthday was almost here. It wasn’t today, it was tomorrow. It was so close, Sally could count the hours. And she did: “Eleven, twelve, thirteen.”

When tomorrow came, everyone said “Happy birthday” to Sally Sinclair. What a fun day she had! What a party fun party she had with her family and friends!

Sally wanted her birthday to last forever. But it refused. First her birthday was tomorrow. Then for a while her birthday was today. Then today left and took Sally's birthday with it. Her birthday stopped being today and became yesterday. And there was nothing Sally Sinclair could do about it.

I wonder what it would be like if tomorrow became today and then never left; I wonder what it would be like if tomorrow never became yesterday — especially if tomorrow was a really special day.

Maybe some day we'll find out.

### **Sermon**

Today's sermon is titled *Future Present*. That sounds like a chapter in a book on English grammar, a chapter long since forgotten, no doubt, along with chapters on the pluperfect tense and the subjunctive mood. Actually, though, the title refers not to a verb tense, but to time — as in, “Today is the *present*” and “Tomorrow will be the *future*.” With that clarification of *future* and *present*, I want to begin, oddly enough, with the past. In particular, I want to say something about history.

**History supplies us with perspectives on the past. But there are many perspectives on history itself.** Here's a sampler: Ambrose Bierce defined history as “an account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools.” Karl Marx observed that “history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.” Winston Churchill predicted, “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.” And, of course, Henry Ford famously scorned history. “History is bunk.”

That's the usual Ford reference that we hear. But he had more to say: “History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today.” For Ford, history's backward gaze aimed in the wrong direction. Ford wanted to focus on the present, perhaps on the cars he was making in Dearborn and on the way those cars were transforming life in the United States. (It's a pity there wasn't a corresponding look beyond the present into the future, to see how far that transformation would go and what a mixed bag the unintended consequences of the mass-produced automobile would be.)

Henry Ford's objections aside, history has its purpose and its place. David McCullough, a well-regarded historian (his biography of Harry Truman is a gem), puts it this way: “History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.” I suppose George Santayana has put it most famously, though: “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

One sure lesson we learn from history is that we cannot change the past. We can change history, however. History is just an account of the past. History is anything but objective. There are few “simple facts” of history. Each generation writes history its own way for its own purposes. Yet, regardless of how the past is presented by history, the past itself cannot be changed. No act in the past, however big or small, can be undone. Nor can the long train of consequences of the past, intended or not, be undone. We have no choice but to live here in the present in the aftermath of the past on our way to the future. In other words, we are all passengers on that long train of consequences. We cannot escape a world that has given us Henry Ford, the Holocaust, and Homer Simpson.

**But what if the past could be changed?** Not to erase people who have lived or events that have occurred. Not to erase the long train of consequences, intended or not. But, somehow, to derail that train, so that it's not the only way into the future. What if the future could somehow supplant the past by finding its way into the present?

After the end of the First World War, William Bullitt led a delegation to the brand-new Soviet Union. The purpose of the delegation was to open diplomatic channels between the Bolshevik regime and the West. Bullitt was accompanied by the journalist Lincoln Steffens, who was well-known as a

muckraker. What Steffens is most well-known for, however, is the statement he made upon returning from the young Soviet Union. He said, "I have been over into the future, and it works." Steffens later disavowed his blindly optimistic assessment, when the Soviet "future" became for too many a hell on earth. There was nothing new about that future. It was no future at all. It was just another way of living with the past, a past we can't escape.

The Bible sketches that past in stark patterns of light and dark — mostly dark. As far back as we can go, to the edge of memory and beyond, to the very beginning, there is a problem. A problem of rebellion. A problem of alienation from God. A problem of indifference. A problem of self-assertion. A problem of buck-passing ("It's because of the woman you gave me"; "It's because of the snake").

As it was in the beginning, so it is now and ever shall be. We may try to ignore the past (it's all "bunk"!), but we can't escape it. We have been riding on its long train of consequences ever since the beginning. And it seems like we'll be riding that train forever, unless and until some dramatic future crashes into the present and turns things around.

So, what if the human story had a new beginning? What if there were a second Adam? What if this second Adam got right what the first Adam got all wrong? What if this second Adam handled that long train of consequences that was unleashed by the first Adam, a train of consequences heading toward a future that is no future? Because there's a deep gorge up ahead. And a bridge has never been built over it; the tracks just end. Meanwhile the crew in the cab of the locomotive keeps adding fuel to the firebox, throwing in wood and coal until the steam pressure (this train has a steam locomotive, of course) is at maximum. All the valves are wide open, and the train is approaching terminal velocity, heading straight for the gorge.

But what if the second Adam made his way forward to the locomotive? What if he climbed to the front of the locomotive? What if he stood on the cow-catcher? What if he stretched himself out across the front of the boiler itself? What if he was the first to go over the edge of the gorge? What if the weight of the locomotive and of the tender and of every carriage in that train, what if all the weight of the past, what if the weight of every intended and unintended consequence, crashed down upon him and buried him deep? What if the second Adam was dead, as dead as can be? And what if he stayed dead? No cartoon miracles this time. He doesn't pop up like Mighty Mouse as soon as the crash ends. He doesn't lift the train high in the air and start spinning it around his head like a lasso. No. He's dead. He's crushed.

But what if a couple of days later, after the smoke clears, the second Adam stands again? What if he carries the train on his back — it's the same train, but it looks different somehow — what if he lifts the train up onto a new set of tracks? What if those tracks head straight toward the sunrise? And what if, instead of being up ahead only, in the far distance — what if the future came down those tracks toward us, here, now?

**In Jesus Christ, the second Adam, the future is here.** That future is all about a new humanity. A humanity no longer imprisoned by the past and its consequences, a humanity no longer alienated from God, a humanity no longer rebels who would rather be god than be with God. Jesus is the living exemplar of that new humanity. And the future of humanity, of the new humanity, is all about resurrection. We are destined to be in the future more in every way than what we are now, more in every way than what we have ever been. Jesus, by his Resurrection, is the firstborn of this new humanity. He is the future. The Gospel, in some ways, amounts to this: In Jesus Christ the future has been over to us, and it works. And that ain't "bunk"!