

The Structure of Faith, Part 1

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

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Genesis 3

As the story begins, the LORD God plants a garden. In the garden, the LORD God places a man and a woman. In the garden, there is but one restriction. The LORD God says, “You must not eat from the tree that gives knowledge of good and evil.”

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.”

And the LORD God said to the snake, “Because you did this, out of all domestic and all wild animals, you are cursed! You will move on your belly and you will eat dust as long as you live. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. Hers will strike at your head, while you will strike hers at the heel.”

To the woman he said, “I will intensify your pain in pregnancy; you will bear children in pain. Yet you will desire your man, and he will rule over you.”

And to the man he said, “Because you listened to what your woman said and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat from it’ — because of you, the ground is cursed! You will eat from it in pain as long as you live. It will sprout thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat cultivated plants. You will eat bread with sweat on your face until you return to the ground, since that’s what you were taken from. You are dust, and you will turn back to dust.”

And the man named his woman name Eve, because she was the mother of everyone living. And the LORD God made leather clothes for the man and for his woman, and he dressed them.

And the LORD God said, “Now that the man knows good and evil, like one of us, he may reach out and also take [fruit] from the tree of life, and eat and live forever.” And the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. And he drove the man out. And east of the garden of Eden, he set cherubim and a whirling, fiery sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

Children’s Story

Sammy the Squirrel never got to meet his Aunt Serena. Before Sammy was born, Serena the Squirrel had been caught stealing acorns from other squirrel families, acorns they had stored away for the winter inside hollow trees.

That was about the worst thing a squirrel could do! Stored-up acorns were a matter of life and death for a squirrel family. They needed those acorns to survive a long, cold winter. To steal those acorns . . . that almost amounted to murder.

So when Serena the Squirrel was found out, all the other squirrels of the Great Forest sent her away. They made the decision together. They didn't care where Serena lived from then on, as long as it wasn't in the Great Forest.

So they sent her away. Away from her home. Away from her family. Away from everything she had ever known.

It was a very hard punishment. And Serena's life was never the same.

Day after day, she thought about the Great Forest. Day after day, she wished she could go back. But there was no hope of that. Serena the Squirrel never went home again.

Sermon

This will be the first of six sermons under the broad theme: "The Structure of Faith." Now, it strikes me as more than a little artificial to refer to the "structure" of faith. Faith, after all, is a living thing, and living things move and grow. But "structure" sounds static. It sounds stationary and lifeless, like an empty office building. "Structure" implies that faith has a specific shape, and perhaps it does. But in my experience — and I don't pretend that my experience is universal — but in my experience, the shape of faith changes over time, changes in a way that "structure" doesn't seem to have room for, though buildings are renovated and redesigned, additions are made, resulting in a different structure, even though many traces of the original structure remain visible . . .

So for these six weeks, I'll work with the metaphor "the structure of faith." And I will fill in the metaphor by following Question & Answer 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What must you know

to live and die in the joy of this comfort [of belonging to Jesus Christ]?

A. Three things:

first, how great my sin and misery are;

second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;

third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

Misery, deliverance, and gratitude. That's "the structure of faith." And for this week and next, it's misery.

"Misery" seems like an apt translation for the original German of the Heidelberg Catechism. The word there in the German is "das Elend." In English it can be glossed as squalor, unhappiness, woefulness, wretchedness, or calamity. Not a pretty word! Without going into detail, we could translate it as "the mess we're in."

That's a starting point for faith. Faith recognizes and comes to terms with the mess we're in. Not that this is the foundation of faith. No. This is not the blocks of faith, nor even the mortar between them. And it's not the concrete footer of faith, nor the bedrock beneath it. Yet if faith does have a structure, if it somehow does resemble a building, then like a building it deals with and shelters us from the elements: from the wind and the rain, for the lightning and the hail, from the snow and the ice. In other words, faith deals with and shelters us from the mess we're in.

Faith begins by recognizing that we're out in the middle of that mess, that we're far from the safety and security, far from the comfort (to use the Catechism's word), of home.

Which brings us to another, even more apt, rendering of "das Elend." It's an older meaning, closer to the time nearly five centuries ago when the Heidelberg Catechism was written. The word is "exile." Exile, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, is a fundamental descriptor of the universal human plight. We are in exile, far from home. Because we have been driven away. Because we have been banished. We no longer belong, not at home, not anywhere. We are, all of us, strangers and aliens in the world, wanderers.

It seems that more often than not, whenever I talk about the Old Testament, I talk about exile. That's no accident. The Old Testament is Israel's book, and Israel's fundamental experience — not its foundational experience, which is exodus, but its fundamental experience — is exile. So much of the Old Testament is an exploration of exile, an explanation of exile, a response to exile.

- Jacob lived as an exile in Laban's house.
- His descendants lived in exile as slaves in Egypt.
- Moses spent forty years in exile in Midian.
- Israel wandered in a forty year wilderness exile.
- David lived as an exile, chased and hounded first by Saul, later by Absalom.
- And, of course, the people were exiled to Assyria and to Babylon.

That's Israel's story. And Israel's story is no different from and fully reflects the universal human story. Because the human story is a story of exile.

The universal human story of exile is told already in the Bible's third chapter, in the story of the man and the woman in the garden. The garden is their home. In the garden the man and the woman have everything they need. They have God, who is with them in the garden. They have each other. They were made for each other, a perfect fit. They have food. They have beauty. They have work to do. The man and the woman belong. They belong in the garden. They belong with each other. They belong to God.

But by chapter's end, the man and the woman don't belong anywhere. They've been banished from the garden. It's no longer their home. They are not welcome there.

They are alienated from each other. The man sees the woman more as a problem to contend with than as a gift. And the woman finds herself no longer in an equal partnership with the man. He names her, as if she is one of the animals!

And they are alienated from the creation. It no longer yields to their dominion, but fights it, throwing up thistles and thorns. And something as natural as childbirth has become risk-filled and agonizing.

Humanity is in exile, and it's a mess. What Genesis 3 would lead us to expect is exactly what we see. Humanity and creation are at odds. And so earthquakes reduce our cities to rubble, hurricanes tear open our levees, and the merciless sun plants cancer on our skin. Humanity and creation are at odds. And so, to quote one observer, "We simultaneously treat the earth as a gold mine and an ash tray." We tear off mountain-tops in West Virginia, hollow them out for coal, and strew rubble everywhere. And we fish certain species to near-extinction, even as we turn the ocean into a chemical stew.

At the same time, we are at odds with each other. And so legislators, insurance giants, hospital conglomerates, manufacturers, and public advocates butt heads in the health care reform arena — to little or no avail. Terrorist groups wielding deadly underwear target airliners and people who live near airports. And we hire border guards and build fences and prisons to deal with "undesirables."

And always we are far from home. Across our state, across our country, millions are locked up in prisons. They're not home. Refugees have come to Columbus from Somalia. They huddle together, but this is not home. Old men and old women live out their last years in what we call nursing homes. But they're not homes, and that's why none of us wants to end up in one. Near downtown a hundred people or more live in a makeshift tent city near the Scioto River. It's where they live, but they're not home. And, of course, millions and millions of us have our own houses, with our own couches and tables and beds, with our own books and family pictures arranged here and there. Yet something's missing and we're not really home, not even after years in a place.

Which brings us to the heart of humanity's exile, which is our exile from God. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul describes humanity's exile this way: "Without hope and without God in the world" (2:12). Exile is really about the fracturing of basic relationships: with country, with home, with family, with friends. Genesis 3 lays out the terrain this way. The human relationship with creation is fractured. Human relationships with one another, on a personal and a corporate scale, are fractured. And the human

relationship with home, with the place we most truly belong, is fractured. No human relationship is really right. And this is especially true of the primary human relationship, our relationship with God.

Having a fractured relationship with God is like having eyes that don't see in color or ears that don't recognize voices. It's like having lungs that don't exchange carbon dioxide and oxygen with the air. Having a fractured relationship with God is like having legs that don't reach the ground or arms that don't reach your hands. Nothing is right. Nothing is level. Nothing is plumb. Nothing is square. Everything is a-kilter and about to fall over, if it hasn't already. That's the mess we're in, and we can't function that way.

Returning to Paul's language, "without hope and without God in the world," imagine trying to see without light or to breathe without air. Imagine trying to stand with no ground to stand on. Everything is "off." Everything is threatening, desperate. And we react poorly to that. We scratch and claw and cry and scream. We tear each other apart. We beak everything. And so, without God, we are, to use the Catechism's English translation — we are "miserable." Miserable because, as the Catechism says later, from out of all this brokenness we are filled with hate. Hate for God. Hate for everyone and everything else. That's the mess we're in. And faith begins by recognizing it.

Yet there's more to say. And I will quickly say two more things. First, despite the bleak picture of Genesis 3 and of Ephesians, God is in the world. And if it is nothing else, God's presence in the world is a presence of grace, a kind, merciful, compassionate presence. And as bad as it could be, God moderates the misery of our exile. God keeps us and all things in check.

Second, this bleak picture has left out the single most important part of the story. We'll get to that as a focus in a couple of weeks. For today, I'll just say this: Jesus changes everything.