

“Walking with God”

Genesis 2:16, 3:1-9

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Prayer for Understanding Lord Jesus, we want to be people who perceive you, savor your love and grow in you, to be among those in whom the power of your hope is at work and who confess you in word and deed. Awaken us. You speak your gracious word throughout the ages. Help us hear! Amen.

There is profound value in exploring the villains of scripture for they are a mirror held up to us that exposes where we have missed the mark of love for all. Villains reveal the familiar shapes and patterns of sin and brokenness. Villains confirm the deep tragedy of the human condition. Recognizing those shapes and patterns helps us recognize where love is lacking in the world around us and in ourselves. While this is really heavy, this is also where the good news comes in. Whenever that uncomfortable villain mirror is held up, God's grace surely follows. Brokenness called brokenness can be restored. Evil called evil can be redeemed. Let us explore the villain, named Serpent, as a mirror to see how we are broken. And remember the ending, God sees all of our sin completely and runs towards us to forgive, heal, redeem, make whole, resurrect, and glorify forever. 3

A reading from Genesis: **Genesis 2:16, 3:1-9 NLT** “God warned Adam, “You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die. The Serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day the Serpent asked Eve, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?” “Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” Eve replied. “It is only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’” “You won’t die!” the Serpent replied to Eve. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.” Eve was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to Adam, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment, their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, Adam and Eve heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees. Then the Lord God called to them, “Where are you?””

The Serpent is intelligent, sophisticated, skilled in rhetoric, a master of spin, and cunning in persuasion. The Serpent never uses force rather seduces. The Serpent uses words to lull one into self-righteousness. The Serpent plays the good guy, reframing reality just enough to make a cage of captivity look like a door to freedom. The Serpent with evil genius distorts God's gift of life and freedom into a sign of God's withholding, distorts abundance with less. God starts by saying, "You may eat from any tree except one." This is a promise of radical abundance. But then the Serpent narrows the entire garden, literally all of creation down to one tree and asks, "Did God really say you cannot eat from any tree?" Suddenly, the abundance disappears and God shifts from a giver to a restrictor. And now freedom feels like it is just out of reach. The mirror that the Serpent holds up to us is this: when surrounded by abundance, we sometimes fixate on the one thing we do not have. We are people who, when given genuine freedom, reach for something just beyond freedom and in that reaching, lose that freedom we already enjoy.

A good tactic of a salesperson is helping one be aware of a need and then matching the product, or service, which will satisfy the need. An evil tactic of a salesperson is convincing one that they have a need that does not exist merely so they can sell their product or service. Evil marketing fabricates an illusion of incompleteness, so they can sell us a product that we do not need with the illusion that the product will make us happier. How does the villain within you prompt you to think that you are incomplete, you do not belong, you are not loved, you need to change to fit someone’s else expectation of you instead of being true to the unique person God created? How are you tempted to think less of yourself and less of others? What stories are you telling to make someone, or some group, look bad? God has created everyone good. And everyone does bad. Bad actions do not destroy the good God has created in each of us.

Rules can provide freedom. Sometimes, what seems to limit us, or inhibit us, are actually structures that give us freedom. An example is properly timed traffic lights. Although being stopped at a red light seems to slow one's travel. If we removed all traffic lights, signs, and rules, then chaos would ensue slowing everyone's ability to get anywhere and deadly accidents would become more common. How is the villain in you complaining about another's freedom imprisoning you?

In Hebrew, the Serpent is called "arum" which means crafty, shrewd, and clever. The Serpent's temptation is not in force or violence, but rather in its ability to plant seeds of doubt in God's goodness and the feeling of lack. Sometimes the most dangerous villain in us is thinking thoughts that gradually erode our love of others and love of self. The Serpent takes God's words and twists them and distorts God's nature. The Serpent takes God's gift of an abundant creation and narrows the vastness down to the one aspect God asks them to refrain from harvesting. The Serpent distorts God's nature from a generous giver into a greedy controller. Sometimes we see lack in the face of abundance and fall prey to the Serpent's lie. Upward comparisons, rather than recognition and gratitude for all that one has, shrinks one's generosity, making our hearts smaller and less open toward those who have even less than we do. How is the villain within you prompting you to make comparisons? How are your comparisons hindering love?

Sometimes the villain in us is adding to God's commands. God's original command was to not eat from one tree, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When Eve relays this back to the Serpent and Adam, she adds, "Nor shall you touch it." God's initial command, which was meant as a gift of safety, has already begun distorting in Eve's mind and expanding. Her imagining of God has made God more controlling and it is on these spiraling thoughts that the Serpent pounces. How is the villain within you tempting you to add to God's commands? How are you refusing to set everyone free with love?

Scripture lets us know that Adam was right there the whole time and stayed silent. Adam does not speak up with the truth. Often, the villain in us is staying silent and not naming the evil of fear, hate, and dehumanizing. Often, the villain in us is apathy in advocating for the oppressed.

After Adam and Eve eat the fruit, they feel shame. The promise was that they would "be like God". Instead, they end up feeling naked and alone. How does the villain in you seek to get you stuck in shame? How do you shame others?

Every week in worship, we confess our sins together and receive the assurance of forgiveness. We confess we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. The captivity the Serpent creates does not feel like captivity. It feels like the pursuit of freedom. It feels like reaching for something better, something more, something you deserve. This is the Serpent's genius; it takes the legitimate human desire for flourishing and attaches it to the wrong object. The desire itself is not sinful, to be whole, to be free, to be known, to thrive. These are good desires. But the Serpent redirects them away from God and toward things or people that cannot satisfy them. We cannot free ourselves because one cannot use the thing that built the cage to escape it. Every reach for the fruit confirms the logic that puts us there. The more one grasps for wholeness through the Serpent's means, the more real the lack feels. Admitting that "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves" is not a statement of defeat. It is a statement of diagnosis, which is the beginning of healing. The Serpent convinced Adam and Eve that they needed to free themselves through their own grasping. The Gospel says you do not free yourself. You are freed. This is why the absolution in worship is in the passive voice "You are forgiven Not, "You have forgiven yourself." Not, "You have worked hard enough to earn forgiveness." You, we, everyone, are forgiven. The cage is opened from the outside.

The Serpent's logic is systemic. The Serpent's move does not stay in the garden. What begins as a whisper in one human heart eventually gets written into law, built into institutions, and embedded in the systems that organize our common life. Sin scales. The logic that convinces one person they are lacking becomes, over centuries, the ideology that convinces one group of people to think that they are more and another group to think they are less. Manufactured scarcity in the face of abundance is the fuel in the engine of extractive systems. Slavery does not happen because slaveholders genuinely lack labor. Colonialism does not happen because empires genuinely lack resources. Exploitation does not happen because the powerful genuinely lack enough. It happens because the Serpent's logic has convinced them that their security, their identity, their survival, depends on taking from someone else. The prophet's task is to name this, identifying the voice as the Serpent's. We have heard it before. We know the misery and shame it produces. Whenever a system tells you that your flourishing depends on someone else's diminishment, you are hearing an ancient lie dressed in the

language of necessity. God's answer to systemic sin is the same as its answer to personal sin. God hears the cry of the oppressed. God is with everyone. God does not leave people abandoned in the structures that have swallowed them. In the garden, God knows exactly where Adam and Eve are. God knows exactly what they have done. God's question to them "Where are you?" creates space for them to be aware of their sin, God's love for them forgives and resurrects. God does this for each individual and every group. God is walking into the mess asking, "Where are you?", and carrying everyone out of the mess into glorious life.

A gift of this story is that once you learn the Serpent's move, you can be aware of the temptation. You hear it in the advertising that promises you will be complete when you buy the thing. The voice that says God is withholding something from you, the restlessness that convinces you the life you have is not the life you were supposed to have. The Serpent continually asks, "Did God really say?" reframing God's abundance as evidence of God's withholding and making cages look like doors. The good news is when evil is named it loses some of its power. You can refuse evil, not through sheer willpower rather through the counter-voice of the Gospel, which says: "You are already beloved. You are already enough. You already have what the Serpent is trying to convince you that you lack. When you hear the Serpent's question answer it with the truth: You are made in the image of God. You are already loved. You are not lacking. You are free."

The ending to today's scripture leans fully into grace and is comforting for those who need to hear that they are not abandoned in their shame. God is walking with us and asking "Where are you" as an invitation to healing. Following this, God creates clothes for them (yet another gift of abundance) and agrees to follow them outside of Eden as they leave the garden. All of this happens before the hard conversations, consequences, and judgment. God continuously gives gracious gifts even to those who continually betray trust, hurt others, and fail to love. God is asking us, "Where are you?" not to expose us, not to shame us, rather to ensure us that God is walking with us. God will clean up every mess. God is making everyone and all whole and glorious. If you want to enjoy the freedom of forgiveness in the present, you do not have to sew your own fig leaves, simply accept God's grace. View each moment as a fresh beginning to love. Amen