

The First Sunday in Lent  
March 5, 2017

**"WHERE ARE YOU?"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Genesis 3:1-9 ~ Matthew 4:1-11

As young kids we used to play hide and seek in the summer in my neighborhood in Midland. We were a big gang of fifteen or so, scattering from home base while whoever was "it" counted to a hundred. We would hide all over the place ... behind bushes, up in trees, under cars. The only rule was that you couldn't leave the street. But it was a big street. A single game could take a couple of hours. We would play until dark when the street lamps blinked on ... that was the sign that our parents wanted us to be home. That was also the sign that person who was "it" would know it was time to call out, "Ally, Ally, All in free."

Genesis three tells the story of the first ever game of hide and seek, or maybe it would be better to say *the now and always game* of hide and seek, where Adam and Eve dove for the bushes as they heard God walking in the garden. They hid from God out of fear ... out of shame ... out of foolishness ... assuming the worst about God. It's human nature, and it makes me think of the time I caught our three year old son ... his face smeared with chocolate ... his hands sticky and gooey brown. "Did you eat my candy bar?" I asked him sternly. "Uh-uh!" he denied, lying through his chocolate covered teeth ... wiping the evidence on his pajama sleeve ... and looking up at me in doe-eyed innocence as if to say, "How could you accuse me of such a thing!?" And then he made a dash for his room!

Our impulse is to hide when the Lord comes looking. We know we have failed to live up to God's intentions. We know we are about pursuits God doesn't like. We don't want God interfering with our chosen paths and calling us in some other direction. But even though God comes looking for us, we're always dodging God, just a little. We want God to find us, or maybe we don't. Well, we have mixed feelings. But we do act as if we had that choice. As if we could hide the evidence. As if we could hide from God. But that is futile ... as evidenced by the words of the Psalmist:

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.*

*You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.*

*You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.*

*You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

*If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

*even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"*

*even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

Don't kid yourself. You can't hide from God.

Still, God seems limited in Genesis three. God doesn't seem to know what has happened ... where Adam and Eve are hiding ... that they are hiding. So God seeks them ... "Where are you?" "Where are you?" "Where are you?" How shall we hear that question? Does God ask it in "wait-'til-I-get-my-hands-on-you" anger ... or with fear ... like a frantic parent searching for a lost preschooler? Or is there a deep and knowing sadness behind the question ... like God already knows but wants Adam and Eve to answer for themselves ... to realize the position they are in ... to understand what they have already done to their relationship with their Creator?

It is not just a simple story of temptation and fall, you know. We read it through the lens of twenty five centuries of interpreters ... Paul and Origen ... Augustine and Luther ... Nieburh and Barth. But there is a heroic dimension to this story ... like the great Greek myths of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods ... or Pandora who unleashed a host of evils but also gave us hope. Eve and Adam steal moral knowledge from God. Adam and Eve become "like God in knowing good and evil" but without the immortality which belongs to God. They eat of the tree of knowledge, but not of the tree of life. They suffer the consequences ... but also enjoy the blessings of moral freedom.

In many ways it is a "coming of age" story ... a picture of healthy human development ... puberty ... attraction to the outsider ... separation of identity from parents ... individuation and independence ... and the suffering adult responsibility that freedom brings. Is it a blessing or a curse to grow up? You may be free to make your own decisions, but you also have to earn your own living. And however much you may long for it, you can never go back to the original carefree innocence of childhood once that boundary has been crossed.

Perhaps the verse about leaving father and mother and cleaving to one another should follow this story rather than precede it. I mean, what happens between God and God's children here is the way of all human development. We have all experienced it from one side if not both. At some point our children have to make the hard journey of separating their identities from our own ... even though they lack our wisdom, our experience, our education, and our "godlike knowledge of the world." It feels like rebellion. It feels like disloyalty. It is disobedience. And the cost of

being free, mature individuals is losing that close connection with your parents that you remember from the innocent days of dependent childhood.

Is it wrong to want to be mature and responsible ... to want a godlike freedom of choice over our own destinies? No, but we shouldn't rush into it before we are ready. I wonder whether the story of Adam and Eve might imply that it is *the way* we gain this independence ... rather than *the fact* of it ... that perhaps God intends for humanity to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *eventually* ... but Adam and Eve reach for it *too soon*. Families negotiate this transition from childhood to adulthood in different ways ... some with great skill and some with stunning ineptitude. If a parent is wise, the youth need not have to steal this freedom by force with a radical disconnect. If the youth is wise, he or she does not rush it and think the full privileges of adulthood should come at the age of fourteen. Communication, mutual respect, a spiritual context can help ... but it is still a tricky business. Teenagers need to know that the way they negotiate their family jail-break has great consequences for the rest of their lives. Parents need to know how to pardon and release their children at the right time ... how to let up without letting go. The issue hinges on the fine art of earned privilege. You don't walk into this world ready to take charge of yourself and others. You earn the right by demonstrating your ability to handle the responsibilities that go with privilege. And much depends on how you react when you fail ... by taking responsibility and not hiding.

Of course, Adam and Eve is a story about all of us. Perhaps Genesis three wants to tell us that we don't handle our parent-child relationship with God in a healthy way ... and that it has terrible consequences for us the rest of *our* lives. We get stuck in an adolescent relationship with God. We think of God as the arbitrary parent who keeps us from enjoying our lives and we act out in angry rebellion ... or we ping-pong back and forth between wanting to be dependent children and wanting to be free adults. Or we try to rush to maturity ... act like spiritual adults when we are still closer to infancy. We don't accept God's "no's." We don't trust God to know what is best for us ... or to know when it is time for us to be free. We aren't patient enough with spiritual growth to understand that we aren't ready for spiritual freedom.

Adam and Eve had a rough disconnect from God's parenting. At the first temptation, they failed the test and then compounded it by hiding ... running away from God. Jesus shows us a better path to maturity ... he takes responsibility for his choices ... he seeks God with prayer and fasting ... he succeeds by staying connected with God.

Interestingly, in neither case is the temptation to be less than human. The temptation is always to be more than human ... to be other than they are ... to push beyond the boundaries of their existence ... to try to grow up too fast ... to reach the goal before it is time ... to take dangerous short-cuts. "Eat this fruit and you will be like God!" "Turn these stones into bread and you will be like God!" "Throw your life down and prove God exists." "Worship me, and I will give you the world!" Adam and Eve say, "Sure, sounds good, why not?" And Jesus says, "No. It isn't time, yet. It isn't time for me to use my power. It isn't time for me to lay down my life. It isn't the right way for me to gain the whole world."

What I notice most is the difference in focus. Adam and Eve are vulnerable because they are self-centered. Jesus is resistant to temptation because he is more focused on what God wants than what he wants.

Adam and Eve seek self-advancement. Jesus seeks God. Even as he brings us grace for our abysmal failure to live up to God's original intentions for us, Jesus shows us there is yet a higher grace. We know that it is better to do right in the first place than to do wrong and need forgiveness. And that it is better to obey in the first place than to need mercy. But we also know that mercy awaits when we stumble. And we know that it is possible to gain freedom through submission ... when you submit to the One who wants to make you free.

Jesus submits to God. And God sends Jesus to seek us. In many ways the whole Bible is a constant reiteration of that question God asks in Genesis three: "Where are you?" God keeps looking for some way to reconnect with humanity. God sends Moses to ask, "Where are you?" God sends prophet after prophet to ask "Where are you?" Finally, when the hour is late and the shadows are long, God sends Jesus to ask "Where are you?"

It is the cosmic game of hide and seek ... people hiding from God ... from themselves ... from each other. But here's the grace ... God never gives up the search. Long into the nighttime of our distress, God walks the streets ... wanders the highways and by-ways ... searching, longing, asking ... "Where are you?" "Where are you?" "Where are you?"

Don't you want to be found? Aren't you a little bored with sitting in your perfect hiding place waiting to be discovered? Then hear the good news from the God who has never stopped searching for you ... Ally-ally-all in free!

May we pray?

Parenting, nurturing God,

You have given us life and all we need to thrive, with only a few rules and boundaries to protect us. We thought we were ready to be mature and responsible. We thought we were smarter than you and could handle the terrors of freedom beyond the boundaries of your love. We were wrong. But, lost and wandering ... hiding our shame and guilt ... hiding from you ... from each other ... from ourselves ... you have found us. Here we are, Lord. Here we are. Here we are. Amen.