

GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7

PSALM 32

ROMANS 5:12-19

MATTHEW 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

On Second Thought!

“Naked and Afraid” is the name of a crazy bizarre reality show on the Discovery Channel (Sundays, 8:00 pm) that places a naked couple in the middle of nowhere, somewhere out in the wild blue yonder, and gives them a challenging and difficult assignment. In this unclothed and undisclosed location, a man and a woman are put in precarious positions, shall we say vulnerably exposed situations, forcing them to improvise, to navigate and negotiate the terrain, while viewers get an up close and personal, look at everything except their most private parts. Amazing exact camera work! Interesting angles! How extremely wacky is that? Well, the Bible in the book of beginnings, in Genesis, gives us its version of “Naked and Unafraid,” a tantalizing, titillating, tale that could be called “Naked and Unashamed Until They Were Not!” Reminds me of the joke the late southern humorist Lewis Grizzard used to tell. “What is the difference between naked and nekked? Naked means you are not wearing any clothes. Nekked means you are not wearing any clothes and you are up to something, as in N-E-doubleKbyGodED! Today we read part of a larger narrative that reveals the ancient Yahwist writer’s attempt to explain how sin came into the world. Let me count the ways! Spoiler alert, this text is all about blaming Eve! Truth be told it is a culturally borrowed story that should have never been told, a tale that has been used for centuries to subjugate women, to portray those with an XX chromosome as inferior, the weaker gender, not worthy of full participation in God’s earthly realm. Women are portrayed as God’s secondary thought, created as an afterthought, molded in Adam’s image as a fragile helpmeet, to use a poor interpretation sourced not from the original Hebrew but translated from the Latin Vulgate, a term regrettably used in this condescending way in the Authorized Version of the King James Bible. It is a position traditionally, historically, advocated by an insecure male patriarchy, especially Christian clergymen, who have long needed to avoid altogether or ignore outright any metaphor, any allegorical imagery, reflecting the feminine Divine, named as Sophia, Wisdom, in the Hebrew Bible. Using scripture as an excuse, a biblically protective shield, women have been negatively classified and categorized, the assumption being that men intuitively somehow have always rightfully known the place sadly reserved for the better half, relegating women as domestic, or did they really mean domesticated, servants. Well, we preach lessons as they appear! We wrestle with these scripture lessons as they unfold every

three years in the lectionary cycle. And so, hold on to your seatbelts, it is time to name this narrative for what it was, or should have been, and for what it is, or should be, and sadly will remain for the great ignorantly unwashed, continuing to be inappropriately cited, abusively peddled and prejudicially used to divide and conquer, arrogantly quoted, conveniently invoked, to build a wall of separation that was never intended and never should have never been erected. This specific narrative, along with other biblical references has been used to benignly and blatantly promote misogyny, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and other sexist abuses. **It is time for a second thought! Upon further review it is time to clarify a whole lot of biblical misinformation, mistranslation, biblical nonsense. And nonsense is nonsense! Every time, all the time!**

You know the story well! Only a precursory recall is needed for our purposes this morning. You will remember that God created the man first, molding him out of clay, directly from the soil, a product of the earth's bounty. Adam was his name! Adám! It was an order of accidental, if not intentional, priorities, a sequence of events that would forever, yes permanently alter, threaten a perceived order relegating men and women, giving males an unfair advantage, a preferential position, a biased assumption that would definitely and defiantly haunt humanity! Adam was the apple of God's eye, the crown of creation, and God's favorite son was given everything imaginable in this perfect biosphere in a garden called Eden. Ah Eden, a most unnaturally balanced environment, like a good porridge, never too hot, never too cold, no bad weather ever on the horizon! Nirvana! Yes, green pastures beside still waters! Everything was within Adam's reach, richly providing for his every need and want, anything to make him happy. In the cool of the evening, we are told that the anthropomorphic deity, God "incarnately" masquerading as a human being, walked and talked daily with this perfectly constructed, carefully crafted, human creation. The Holy One sincerely believed that all the animals that Adam had named, along with this emerging and evolving divine/human companionship, peas and carrots, would be enough to fill the void, more than ample to suffice for Adam to not only survive, but to thrive in this unbelievable world that seemed like make-believe. It was a beautiful relationship! All was well until it was not! Adam remained what we would describe as despondent or even depressed, moping around this garden in Eden knowing that something was amiss, something of import, of greatest significance, was missing from his life but not knowing exactly what it was. Even God, the all-knowing, all-seeing, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, great and almighty, awesome and powerful One, sensing Adam's dis-ease and displeasure, was stumped. Holy brain freeze! The creator of the universe in all its glory could not figure out what was troubling, so deeply disturbing, this prized creation made in the very image of the Holy One. What we have here is a conundrum, a failure to communicate, a mystery wrapped in much enigma. Well, as we know, leaning into a temporary literalization of this fantastic fable, God was able to finally figure out these mysterious things, reaching a most satisfactory conclusion. Adam needed a colleague, required for himself a partner in crime as we say, someone equal to him, an ezér keneg do, to use the proper Hebrew idiom, a not-so-subtle nuance, far more than semantics, in the ancient language as Old Testament scholar Nancy deClaissé-Walford argues! No, this word did not and does not indicate inferiority or subservience at all, no way indicates second class status, but the

Hebrew precisely infers, no, strongly stresses, no, explicitly demands, the gift of a suitable, equal, partner. Adam and Eve's relationship was by design meant to be an egalitarian partnership in every conceivable way, balanced in every way imaginable. But forget Hebrew linguistics for a moment, to meet Judaism's and Christianity's ecclesiological and theological, its political and societal purposes, the translation typically, usually, given, sadly and unfortunately conferring a perfunctory, yes, practical, a very pragmatic, stereotypical bias, alluding to a more sinister image, that because Eve was created out of a rib belonging to Adam that she was automatically, was inferentially, his possession, owned like cattle, farm animals, considered a subordinate, subservient, creature, made in the image of the man and not of God, programmed to live at the whims of her master's discretion. She was by virtue of her created status, for all intents and purposes, a slave except in name only. And the farmer hauled another load away!

Back to our story! Plot twist! All was well at this point in time in the garden, Adam and Eve enjoying the fruits and vegetables yielded in abundance, a vegetarian, perhaps even vegan, only society. I would have starved to death! They were also enjoying each other's company, Adam fat and happy, feeling blessed and finally made whole, yes, Eve completing him, complementary in every way imaginable, suiting his fancy to a tee. Yet God never seemed to smile on Eve. She was Adam's appendage and evidently not God's favorite daughter! Adam, however, was finally fulfilled emotionally, mentally, physically, and yes that meant sexually, and, of course, spiritually. There was nothing bad on the radar in this utopian society now made just for the two of them. We are given no details about Eve and Adam's relationship, but can only imagine positive things, a real partnership including wonderful conversation, ecstatically erotic intimacy, and a level of trust that was transparent, vulnerable, open and honest. It was the kind of human coupling for which many of us spend a lifetime aspiring, more than a fantasy, a harmonic convergence of synthetic quality, a combining of flesh, a coming together of body, mind, soul, and spirits, all the fulfillment of which we dream, hope and pray, no matter our orientation. After all, love is love! Well, there was one problem, of course there had to be one problem. And this problem was a big problem, a major problem on steroids! Frankly, it was a problem of God's own making, yes, created by God, the real tempter in this story! In God's shortsighted plan, God set Adam and Eve up for failure by creating the proverbial "tree of the knowledge of good and evil!" The whole scenario is revealed in the text! Think about it, how integrated of thought and person would anyone be who did not know whether they were wearing clothes, whether they were naked, walking around in the buff? Ah, life is but a streaking zone! I am very grateful that I know when I am in my birthday suit and when I am not! I am sure you are glad that I know the difference too! If that measure, that low bar, is the biblical standard, the baseline, for awareness and obedience, do not sign me up for that! Don't you dare touch that tree! Don't even think about touching it! I mean it! You will be punished! As M. C. Hammer once rapped, "Can't touch this!" It is off limits! I mean, just what did a supposedly all-knowing God think was going to happen? Just how did God think that one would go? Go figure! And while I am on a rant, do we really believe that a God of loving grace, kindness, mercy and peace, as we wonderfully learn in the life and times of Jesus, would do such a demonic thing, setting up the

couple by setting a trap of such magnitude, of such ginormous, pivotal proportions? The Bible might be selling but I am not buying! Good luck with that!

So, Eve is persuaded by the serpent to take a big bite, the snake reported to be “the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made!” Yes, just chew on that one! We know the Bible is not a science book! Let me count the ways! But since when does any reptile qualify as “the most intelligent of all the wild animals” in existence then or now? That dog won’t hunt; that pig won’t fly! Besides, they are smarter! That snake won’t strike or slither! But I digress; I often do! Eve is told by the wily, writhing serpent that if she or Mr. Gullible eat of the tree that surely, one or both of them would die! The serpent, who is far more honest than given credit, replies to Ms. Curiosity, “You won’t die! God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly, and you (yes, you) will be like God, knowing good and evil!” Well said! True, very true! No fake news here! No alternative facts! Well, curiosity killed at least one of the nine lives of the cat and it certainly killed the curious characters in this story! If the definition of being like God is knowing the difference between good and evil, then, by God, we have all made it, we have achieved success! While many human beings traffic in evil, wicked to the core, all of us know the difference! Hitler, Putin, the list gives us an endless supply! Our most egregious sins are of commission not omission! On that, I rest my case! Someone, and I know not who should be attributed this quote, declared that after Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, that God and the serpent looked at each other and winked! Something to ponder! Another plot twist, a different perspective! To misquote the title of a novel based in Savannah, Georgia, there was no “midnight in the garden of good and evil!” **According to the Priestly writer of the first creation story, there was only a world of “good,” no, “very good!” Better choice! God did not and does not create bad things, or bad people, but freely allows badness, yes, a result of freewill, as a very real part of our humanity, encouraging, enabling, emboldening and empowering, us to be fully human!**

Now, suddenly this naïve couple becomes fully aware, even if painfully so at first. This dynamic duo is absolutely, completely, transparently self-conscious, experiencing an immediate metamorphosis, transformed in the twinkling of an eye, call it transfigured, recalling last week’s profound biblical imagery. The result, Eve and Adam immediately become fully human and being fully human is who and what we all are created to be, designed as divine images, a spark of divinity imbued and instilled, crafted deeply inherent within us, the story in question turning this gracious gift into perhaps the ultimate irony. And no, they do not now suddenly pose an existential threat! We are glorious imitations, facsimiles, of the Holy! Oh my! I concur with scholar and progressive theologian Matthew Fox who wrote a book titled “Original Blessing,” his work defending a counter narrative that is also an equally very biblical and rational idea. God did not create us with “original sin,” creating us with a tainted spirit, a stained soul, programming or predisposing us to fail, to commit one (expected) act (that seemed rather harmless, not such an egregiously serious violation) that would pollute humanity forever. Refuting what a local clergy person, a man, once said about our condition, no, sin is not an heirloom gifted to us by our forebears. It is not our damnable legacy! That’s just wrong! Our propensity to err is only but a part of a much larger love story of God’s grace, mercy, peace, and

forgiveness. God did not and does not work that way! Jesus boldly proved that point! A friend of mine has a book coming out soon titled *Evil and the Garden of Good: Exploring the Mystery of Suffering*. There is a quote in this book from a previous sermon by a certain Tim Shirley who you now know rather well. T. Wade says, "What Fox calls 'original blessing,' he says can also be referred to as 'original goodness,' 'original grace,' or 'original wisdom,' a phrase (Fox) borrows from the 12th century nun, Hildegard of Bingen. Fox declares in the preface to his book, *Original Blessing*, "Since "blessing" is the theological word for "goodness," original blessing is about original goodness. The forces of fear and pessimism so prevalent in society and religion need to be countered by an increased awareness of awe and goodness." Fulgham adds, "as Dr. Shirley points out, Matthew Fox's work is helpful in indicating that we can speak of original blessing and goodness as opposed to the fall-redemption theme. God bestowed on humans all the qualities of humanness at the beginning, including the freedom to choose good or evil, sadness or joy; and likewise, God created nature as good but not perfect. And God said it was good, all good and thus God 'blessed' all creation." And no, I have never quoted myself before! Weird! Very weird!

This story from Genesis must be understood as the height of biblical mythology, legendary lore, a tale attempting to describe the indescribable, to explain the inexplicable, to express the inexpressible. The only temptation to which we have succumbed is to take these words verbatim, at face value, making them literal, factual, history! Nonsense! Among the numerous problems with embracing this material as a transcription of actual events is that this story will eventually, perhaps inevitably, metastasize, articulated and fomented by the first through third century founders and framers of the early Church, mutating into a monster reflected and poorly reinterpreted in the Christian scriptures as myopically focused writers promoting a clear agenda made the greatest leaps, assuming, theorizing, and suggesting that Jesus was the new and perfected Adam and that Mary, his mother, was the new and perfected Eve. Not! A cottage industry of bad theology was spawned from this narrowly interpreted conjecture, a view that has continued to cast a deep, dark, shadow on women, perpetuating the horrific myth that those of a certain gender, those of female persuasion are less than, inferior too, anyone born with different anatomical parts. I will never forget the 1987 Southern Baptist Convention meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. The late Adrian Rogers, an evil Baptist pastor who was a major player in the denomination's takeover and infamous "Holy War," was asked to preach the annual doctrinal sermon. He chose for his topic that year the Virgin Birth, a sermon designed from the outset, the opening remarks in his introduction, to advocate for a blatant agenda intended to diminish and disempower women, especially radical young women of college and seminary age who dared think they might become ordained clergy, specifically pastors of local churches. Rogers began the sermon by seeking to prove that God was male, a point used to declare that, therefore, all men were of a godly makeup and thus women were not! He made the audacious, though perversely brilliant, point, reminding his hearers that because it is the male who determines the sex of the child, men having an XY chromosome while women have an XX. Thus, God is male, exactly the masculine way "he" has traditionally, historically, been described, a white guy in a white robe on a white throne, and I assume with appropriate accessories! Follow the insane, but sadly, very rational, logic here. Since Jesus was a boy and since Mary as a virgin was impregnated by the very

Spirit of God, thus, sans a man, God provided the necessary, all important and essential, XY chromosome which required the only begotten, incarnate, Son of God, to be male, no other possibility inherent in Jesus' birth, these ideas profoundly echoed, images reinforced in the infancy narratives of both Luke and Matthew that also happen to be wonderfully mythological tales in their own right.

Yes, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth has been used for centuries to diminish and disempower women in every way imaginable in the Church. Mary has been venerated in order that her power as a woman might be neutralized, avoided, ignored, or dismissed outright. Mary sets a glass ceiling of which no other woman since can aspire, her uncanny one-of-one, ability to conceive an embryo in the womb without the aid of a male contributor, a male participant, procreation now taken over by divine fiat. All women, however, can meet the low bar, the bottom feeder status of Eve who committed the gravest sin of all time, the vilest violation, our sinfulness dragging us all downhill from there. **Yes, Adam had a great excuse, perfect to a tee, "the woman, she did it, she gave me to eat, she beguiled, she tempted me. It is her fault! It is all her fault and hers alone! How could she be so blind, so dense and dull, so thick and selfish, so easily duped, naively fooled, so stupidly persuaded, so willfully gullible!"** And Adam even had the audacity of reminding God that it was God who had the very bad, dumbest, lamest, idea of creating, manufacturing, the woman in the first place, uh, second place, a seductress who became his temptress, giving him a poor excuse as he successfully passed blame which placated, satisfying a pathetically and pitifully pouting, forlornly lost man who desperately needed a scapegoat for all time. **Blame God! Blame Eve! It is her fault! It is God's fault! Adam needed a scapegoat and so he found two, throwing God and Eve under the proverbial bus! Cast no stone for I am without sin! Take no responsibility! I have no accountability! Yes, there is even a convenient theological rationale for this heresy, the claim that because Eve was first in the Edenic Fall women are therefore not entitled to all the rights and privileges afforded their male counterparts. Women are rendered second class, second rate, because they fell first, they were the first to fall! (For a ludicrous take on the Edenic Fall, used as an argument to prohibit the ordination and pastoral leadership of women, see the resolution presented and adopted at the 1984 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.) Let's be candidly honest, Adam was complicit, equally culpable! The argument is a nonstarter! And men have gotten a pass, been given the benefit of the doubt, excused for their complicit behavior ever since. Power, and power is an intoxicating status, has mostly, by and large, down through the centuries, been reserved and maintained almost exclusively by men. Frankly, men will never be liberated theologically until they embrace the full equality and inclusion of women! It is the only fair, equitable, egalitarian, thing to do!**

Shifting gears just a bit as we bring this sermon home, a reader of the February 23rd edition of *Progressing Spirit: Explorations in Theology, Spirituality, and the News* asks a very pertinent and relevant question for our time, "Why do so many churches continue judging people? Their sermons so often speak of how progressive they are and profess that certain people are of the wrong – or heaven-forbid – or non-existent belief, the wrong sexual orientation, or political alliance. Jesus didn't judge; why do many modern churches still preach this way?" I would first

suggest it is because, while many preachers' hearts and minds are in the right places, they either fear professional repercussions or they have not discovered a suitable language to replace the same old, same old, traditional, even conservative or fundamentalist, musings they have always heard and parroted, though repackaged and perfumed as if that would make a difference and save the day. Responding to this question, progressive pastor and preacher, the Reverend Greta Vosper reminds this reader that so much of these pontifications are meant to protect or to control, keeping us from harming ourselves and/or others. She says that this is what "many of our laws do: they put a fence around the real law to keep people from accidentally, or intentionally, becoming the real problem. Biblical prohibitions are often fences around other breaches that, at the time, would have been considered catastrophic." I think she is on to something! I think she is right! So much of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible and much of the Christian scriptures were designed as warning posts, so much of the time forgetting God's grace and our humanity, our humanness. In a vain attempt, some would argue a failed attempt, to describe or explain human frailty and weakness, a normal propensity to err, the writer of Genesis created a universal and forever generational curse on women. My hunch is that this caused and continued an accidental, but very egregious, very serious, crisis literally for the ages.

(Greta) Vosper, (writing for *Progressive Spirit*) notes that so many of our "churches are often organized around what is good and what is bad. It's in our genes to do so, of course. Religion was about differentiating people from one another when the other was considered dangerous. . . ." She declares, there is now "no need for it!" She then adds, reminding all of us, lest we forget, that Jesus judged aplenty! He called out injustice whenever and wherever he saw it, however he encountered it with whomever deserved it and needed it. Jesus always stood his ground, never backing down and was always fully engaged! Vosper concludes, "in the religious world, do's and don'ts will always be a part of the ongoing story as they have always been part of religious history." Our job is to navigate and negotiate, to manage the polarities, to seek the common good, to passionately, zealously, seek in every way imaginable righteousness which is always born of social justice in the myriad ways it is demanded in God's earthly realm, right here and now, each and every day. And a major part of a socially just society is that all persons become valued and treated accordingly, judged solely on the content of their character, and while that obviously includes the racial and multicultural melting pot that seasons, yes, sweetens, our global village, it begins with what should have always been the simple stuff, the baseline, acknowledging and affirming a universal playing field in which men and women not only support one another, but give thanks to God for the differences, The alternative would be awfully boring, that when combined, make us communally whole, make us fully human as a worldwide community and makes for a darn good church. We do not need to give that a second thought!

Part of my take on the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, a multifaceted narrative from which we can draw many insightful meanings, is that Jesus reminds all of us who read his story that we are all responsible, accountable, for our behavior, our thoughts and actions. Jesus confronted his demons, real and imagined, as they appeared on his life's radar, as they were

presented in the crucible of his life and living. Jesus never looked for a scapegoat, no excuses, no placing blame, no passing the buck. Jesus faced his unique circumstances, his personal experiences, engaged and embraced his tests, trials, and tribulations, soberly, astutely, forthrightly, and honestly. Jesus set the bar, perhaps a new bar, a very high standard that was and is impossible, remains unreachable, except made easily attainable by God's grace. Jesus walked the talk and talked the walk! He practiced what he preached and preached what he practiced! His very life gave him the right and privilege to call out evil whenever and wherever he saw it, normally reserving his hardest and harshest comments for those who abused their authority, the many men who had long held power and continued to wield it at will. Yes, he held accountable those responsible for magnifying the letter of the law, indeed speaking truth to power in every situation and under all circumstances. Jesus showed humanity that the real sin confronting our humanness, derogatory behaviors diminishing who we are capable of becoming, prohibiting us from fulfilling our best capacity, impacting our ability to become fully human, was the sin of power, unchecked, unbridled, unabashed power. By keeping his eye on the prize of loving and serving God, Jesus deflected every imaginable impediment tempting him to take the easy way out, the paths of least resistance, the least common denominators of well-worn pathways. May it be so for us as we seek to be all that we can be, the same being said for the beloved faith community of First Congregational United Church of Christ.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to an equitable life in every way that discipline demands! Amen and amen.