

Hide and Seek with God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 13, 1991, the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, at Oxford High School. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 3:8-19; Psalm 90:1-12; Hebrews 4:1-3, 9-13; Mark 10:17-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When God made the world, so the Bible says, God made everything beautiful and good. The first people were happy! God use to come and walk with Adam and Eve. God would talk with them as intimate friends. No terror. No hiding. No shame. But intimacy. They lived in harmony with the natural world. They lived together, male and female, in harmony and equality. This is the kind of relationship God intended for humankind.

But can we really believe this? Was there ever a Garden of Eden? Were Adam and Eve historical people? Was there ever a time when women didn't experience pain in childbirth? Was there ever a time when men didn't seek to dominate women. Was there ever a time when there were no weeds to pull in the garden, no thorns, no pesky mosquitoes? Was the world ever any different? Hasn't the world always been this way? Isn't it hopelessly romantic to think that it was ever that way or that it could ever be that way again?

This story raises *many* questions for *many* modern men and women. *You* may have many questions about this story. *I* have questions, too. And I can't answer all of them. This story speaks of something that happened in a place and at a time we can only begin to imagine. It was a world without sin.

But, now, many things in the world aren't beautiful and good any more. People are often extremely unhappy. Some people, in fact, live in extreme misery throughout their lives. There's sickness and sadness. There's hatred and anger. There are selfish people, and wicked people. There's quarreling and fighting. Men seek to keep women subordinate to them. Nature is red in tooth and claw.

What's the matter? What's happened to the beautiful world, and to the people that were so happy at first? Some would say that this is just the way the world is. It always was that way. It always will be that way. Some even deny the very existence of evil. What we see as suffering and evil is just an illusion, a dream.

But the witness of Holy Scripture is that sin has spoiled God's world. That's what we confess as Christians. That's what we confess as Presbyterians. In the words of our Brief Statement of the Reformed faith, we confess,

In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.

Our Old Testament lesson tells the story. Right after Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had told them not to eat God came to the garden. "But

when Adam and Eve heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, they hid themselves from God because they were afraid."

They were now terrified of God. This servile fear of God is not what God created humankind for. Yet, humankind, universally fears God and seeks to placate God through ceremonies, rituals, magic, incantations and sometimes even by human sacrifice. Through education and sophistication modern men and women can suppress that fear. We intellectualize our faith in attempt to suppress that fear that's deep in our hearts. Humankind, today, universally fears any *real* encounter with the living God. We hide from God and many of us no longer even hear the sound of God's footsteps. But to be happy, in order to be happy, we must live with God. It's terrible to live without God, to be separated from God. Without God our hearts are restless, fearful and full of shame.

Adam and Eve were afraid because they knew they'd sinned. They'd disobeyed God. That's why they were afraid. That's why they hid. They knew God is holy. The Bible bears witness to a God who is holy. There's no sin in God. Sin makes us unholy and it separates us, alienates us from God. If we're unholy, we can't live close to God. So they knew they had to be punished for their sin. They knew they were guilty of breaking off their relationship with the God who created and loved them.

God had told Adam and Eve that pain and sickness would come as a

result of disobedience. God told them that because they had broken off their relationship to God the environment would no longer be friendly, but would produce thorns and thistles. Humankind would have to toil for food. He told them that no longer would the man and woman enjoy the equality for which God had created them. Now the woman would experience pain in childbirth and the man would seek to suppress and dominate her.

God's attitude towards them had not changed. God's desire to walk with them was unchanged. *They* had changed. The curse that God pronounced was not God's will for humankind. God had created humankind to glorify and enjoy God. We were created to enjoy God. God created humankind to live in harmony with nature. God created men and women, equally in God's image, but we rebel. We deserve God's condemnation.

But God didn't give up on us. God acted with justice and mercy to redeem creation. The God which the Bible bears witness to is a God who always takes the initiative in seeking reconciliation. God, the God we know in Scripture, the God we know through Jesus Christ, is a God who comes down from heaven to earth to seek and to save the lost. God is the Good Shepherd who goes searching for his lost sheep.

Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

On the day that the man and women disobeyed God, God made a promise to Eve that contained the seed of hope for humankind. God had said

to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." As Christians interpreting this story, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, we hear in those words the first promise of a Savior who would take sin away and bring us back to God so that we don't need to be afraid any more.

God was saying that he was going to put hatred between the woman and Satan forever and between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of Satan forever. But some day one of the woman's offspring would destroy Satan's offspring. In crushing the serpent's head, however, His own heel would be injured. The serpent would be destroyed, and the offspring of the woman would be injured- but He would emerge the victor.

So as soon as sin appeared in this world, God's grace appeared. This is the Gospel. It's amazing to think of God walking into the garden right after sin had marred the beauty of God's creation, seeking God's lost children. God's word to the serpent, "He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel," means exactly the same as "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish but have everlasting life."

When God came into the garden right after our first parents fell into sin, I'm sure that God sensed how ugly and corrupted everything had become and how much worse it would get. God had every reason, then, to reject our

fallen race. But God didn't do it then. And God doesn't do it now.

In Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, the second Eve, we're no longer banished, but accepted back into fellowship with God. In Christ there's freedom from the bondage of sin, from the condemnation and guilt of the law, from the shame of self-reproach, from the alienation between men and women, and from the overpowering rule of death. In Christ a new creation begins.

There's so much sin in the world. There's so much sin in our lives. There's only one way to be saved from that sin and its consequences: through Christ. We confess our sins... our disobedience, our fear, our shame and guilt and we trust in Christ, who paid the price of our sins when he died on the cross. And then-

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Let us Pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Brief Statement of Reformed Faith
Joel Nederhood, Planting the Cross