

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


WE CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

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*"He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."*

*Genesis 3:24*

One of the most overworked and mis-used words in the English language is the word "new". We seem susceptible to its lure and fall for it time and time again. I think of those who struggle with obesity and sing the praises of a new diet. Those who wrestle with preaching and welcome a new hermeneutic. Those who are fed up with the church and reach out with enthusiasm for a new religion. Those who lament urban blight and sprawl and breathlessly hail the announcement of a new city. Those who have had enough of bungling in high places and happily anticipate a new politics. Those for whom the old age was a source of grief and deprivation and who hang on to every word that heralds the new age now in prospect.

Behind all this is a yearning to return to "the land of beginning again." Who wouldn't like a fresh start -- for himself, his country, the church, the world? If only we could do the whole business once more from the top!

"Backward, turn backward, O time in thy flight,  
Make me a child again just for tonight."

\* \* \*

Scholars have alleged that no chapter in the Bible has been subjected to more attention over the years than the third chapter of Genesis. I mention it today because of a belief that it has something sobering to say to us in our pursuit of a lost innocence.

Chapter 3 in Genesis is the story of the fall of man. Interpreters have picked it clean by now! Lit-

eralists insist that with a few more digs they'll be able to unearth the garden and tell us where it all took place. Students of comparative religion never tire of pointing out older and larger traditions from which the Hebrews borrowed. Psychologists warm to the accuracy with which the story of the first temptation is narrated. Incurable symbolists are sure they know the hidden meaning of the trees, the fruit, the serpent, the shame, the fig leaves. Wise teachers caution us not to lose the meaning of the story by taking it for historical fact.

Church school teachers tell the story to their six year olds in an atmosphere of spit balls and flying chalk; and Reinhold Niebuhr bends his mind to expound it in his celebrated Gifford Lectures.

The story is absurd if taken literally, but inexhaustibly profound when seen as myth. Adam and Eve are us -- and they had it made. The garden was a perfect environment and they were as innocent as life could be. What's more, they complemented each other, and all of their necessities were provided for.

And they blew it! For their failure they were held accountable. Their punishment was eviction -- permanent eviction. Innocence could not be repossessed. "God drove out the man and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

\* \* \*

This myth of a lost innocence is universal. I hope the word myth does not trouble you. It shouldn't. It does not mean a cock and bull story. Myth is simply the way we humans talk of concerns and convictions that are too deep for telling in any other way. Robert Ellwood of the University of Southern California, a professor who has done much study in the field of contemporary religion in America, reminds us that, "Mythical narrative language is always a necessary part

of the expression of ultimate things. Man's problem is that while he incurably wants to know the most that can be known, what things are in their widest dimension, who he was and who he is and who he can become, all his experiences are limited to particulars. We do not experience Pleasure and Pain, but this pleasure and that pain, this excellent meal or that toothache, as C. S. Lewis once pointed out. We can, however, tell stories in such a way that particular joys and pains and events seem to explain what is always true." 1

A myth might be described as a collective idea, a primal sense we have about the things that matter most. It has to do with something we know before we know anything! It is in our bones before it is in our literature. So here (in Genesis 3) we have the myth that speaks to our splitness, the cleavage that we feel between our essence and our existence. The intimation we have that things as they are do not represent things as they were meant to be. That you as you are do not represent what you were meant to be.

Eden is shorthand for innocence, and innocence can mean a lack of actual experience, a lack of personal responsibility, or a lack of moral guilt. Tillich observed that, "Innocence designates the state before actuality, before existence, before history." 2

What does Eden mean to you? Some see Eden as a history before history. Some see Eden as the earliest years of childhood. Some see Eden as the innocence that we know in our dreams --Jung was big on this. Some see Eden as the vision of the perfect that haunts us all our days. Had we no sense of the perfect, the imperfect would not trouble us so. This idea of a Golden Age -- back there, out there, in here -- is virtually universal. It is to be found in the literature of the Romans, the Greeks, the Persians and the Indians as well as in the literature of the Hebrews.

\* \* \*

The Biblical narrative goes to great lengths to remind us that we cannot go back. That aspect of the myth is our focus for today. The gate was shut! Not only so, but it was guarded by the Cherubim, those traditional protectors of the holy. And then, as for added precaution, there was set before the gate the spectacle of a revolving, flaming sword.

Such security measures imply that we would want to go back. It's as though God anticipated our hunger for innocence. But the message is clear -- we can't go home again, we must go on. Innocence is not for us, only history. "God drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

\* \* \*

What does it mean to know ourselves as living on this side of Eden's shut and guarded gate? It means for one thing that our lives can never be that pure. We cannot recreate perfection in history.

I like in my preaching to call attention to men and women in today's world whose heroism is likely to go unnoticed. One such is Colonel Hugh Simonson whose name appeared unprominently in the news last week as the man who masterminded a peaceful settlement with the Menominee Indians in Wisconsin. Colonel Simonson was in charge of the National Guard in that potentially explosive situation. A Roman Catholic monastery had been taken over by the Indians and the town folk thereabouts were getting restless.

From the outset this unusual military man insisted that the whole abbey was not worth a life. He ordered his men to function with unloaded guns. He directed that heat and light be restored in the buildings being held. He saw to it that the Indians were supplied with food.

But critical to our subject today are these words



from a story that appeared in "The New York Times."  
"All through the long days and nights, the colonel  
said that the Indians had needs that must be met but  
that he was in no position to rectify the tortured  
history of relations between whites and Indians in  
America" 3

We do not function in Eden. Revisionist history  
is very much in vogue today, and enormous guilt  
feelings are being generated all over the world. An  
unrealistic intention is being formed in many hearts  
to go back and start it all over again and do it right.  
But it can't be done. No man, no group can rectify  
in our time all of the injuries done to American  
Indians or any other people.

A year ago there was a big hassle out in New  
Mexico that centered in a monument in one of the larger  
cities of that state. The monument celebrated a  
battle out of the distant past in which brave sons of  
the west had killed hundreds of Mexicans. Understand-  
ably, some of the Mexican Americans now living in  
that state found the statue objectionable. They  
demanded that the governor raze the statue.

But with a wisdom that is all too rare in high  
office, the governor refused. Instead, he proposed  
that a new plaque be placed beside the old one. The  
added message was to the effect that while our ances-  
tors in their time thought and felt that way, we no  
longer think and feel that way today.

There has to be some cut-off point. Everything  
is not correctable by us. The trouble with those who  
have a nostalgia for Eden is that they are always  
looking back. They are wanting to discover where the  
ball of yarn got started so that they can go back and  
take the tangles out. Meanwhile they have dissipated  
creative energies that could well change the present  
and brighten prospects for the future. We can't roll  
history back any more than we can push toothpaste back  
into a tube. No matter how much I do there will  
always be more that I have not done.

I consider it an honor to number Dr. Robert Gordis among my friends. Dr. Gordis is one of the ablest Jewish scholars of our time. He did a little piece awhile ago entitled, "On Leaving Something for the Messiah." It was addressed to his fellow Jews who were insisting that only the Israeli boundaries of 1968 could be accepted in any negotiated peace. No changes, not an inch anywhere, that was it. And Gordis, with a deeper understanding of the Eden story than any of us enjoy, simply asked his brothers and sisters to relax. Leave something for the Messiah! We can't recreate Edenic perfection. We must be realistic and flexible. Our lives can never be that pure.

That we live outside Eden's shut and guarded gate means also that our lives can never be that influential. An interesting aspect of our story has to do with the four rivers that went out from the garden. To the Oriental mind, rivers are a sign of life. The fact that those rivers flowed out into all the world meant that all of history was to be influenced by what went on there.

There are times when I wish that I could be that influential -- that so much could be riding on my commitment. Can you imagine the results had Adam and Eve passed the test! The incalculable benefits that would have flowed from their obedience. They failed, however, and alarming deficits followed.

I suppose there lodges in the hearts of many a college junior or senior the determination to go out and show the world. But the hard fact of the matter is that the world is a lot more complicated now than any Eden. The garden paradigm is not a reliable paradigm for life. It is almost as though a chess match has been going on for thousands of years. One generation gets up from the table and says to the next, "Now it's your turn to make the moves." When I get there, the game is already under way. I inherit certain positions and formations. It is not my privilege to make the opening moves and determine the strategy. I just come in and do the best I can with the pieces on the board.



No ethical action is altogether private, but no ethical action (or spiritual action for that matter) can be all that influential! To go from chess to baseball (happy thought now that our Knicks aren't doing so well), in the early spring a hitter who gets two or three hits will see his average soar. A bad day at the plate will see his average drop dramatically. But long about August, when our hitter has been up to bat some three or four hundred times, a good day or a bad day isn't quite that telling. The averages begin to assert themselves.

It is a fantasy - perhaps even a blessed fantasy - to feel that we can make a monumental impact on history. We are not in Eden. We were evicted! The gate is shut and unopenable!

Finally, the knowledge that we live outside the shut and guarded gate of Eden means that our lives can never be that simply understood. Most evangelists when they talk about sin presume a garden of Eden scenario. An individual is tempted, an individual yields, an individual is punished. But it doesn't happen that way. This is why so much that goes under the name of evangelism is suspect: It lacks the ring of reality.

Eden was a "suspended" place without any connections to history. I know myself now to be a part of a large network of life. Adam and Eve had a perfect environment. I did not. Adam and Eve had no parents. I did. I am a product of the knocks and boosts of centuries. Neither my gifts nor my sins are entirely my own.

Myron Madden in his book, The Power to Bless, talks about a minister who broke mentally under psychological, social, financial and vocational pressures. In the mental hospital he took leave of the pain of it all. He would wear no clothes and would insist that he was "old man Adam before sin entered the garden." Madden says, "He not only returned past his sins, he went back before there was any sin any-

where. The present was so demanding and disturbing that he sought relief in the innocent past." 4

We can't go home again. My life will never be that pure. My life will never be that influential. I can never understand my life that simply. "God drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword." The closed gate of Eden is behind us.

\* \* \*

But there is one more **thought** to share before we finish. You may have wondered about the New Testament passage today. In the King James Version the critical words come when Jesus says, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) Gates do not move. They are simply there. Jesus, then, is telling his church to carry the battle to the gates of hell. This is a good way to understand ourselves. We live between the gates -- between the shut gate of Eden which we cannot pass, and the gates of hell towards which we move under command of Christ!

It was the genius of Jesus that he kept individuals and society looking forward. I read recently about a new mirror that was patented last fall. It's called "Select-a-Size." The mirror shows how a person standing in front of it would look after a considerable loss of weight. The mirror keeps the head true to its present proportions, but the lower part of the glass is so curved that a person can see what he or she would look like minus those 20, 30, 40 -- do I hear 50? -- pounds. I think that's a tremendous idea. Instead of rummaging around in the past to see whose mistreatment causes you to eat so much candy, look into the mirror and see what you can become! And I am told that weight watching organizations, health spas, psychologists and doctors are using these mirrors to good advantage. That's really what Jesus did. He never let anybody talk at length about their hangups. He just showed them what they could be like. He turned them away from

gazing fondly at some irrecoverable Eden and pointed them to the future of his promise.

He did the same for the world at large. In the prayer he gave us, the forward look is dominant, "Thy kingdom come." We look for a day when his will shall be done on earth even as it is in heaven.

So, we are to find the hungry and give them meat, the thirsty and give them drink. So, we are to find the naked and clothe them. So, we are to find the sick and imprisoned and visit them. So, we are to find the strangers among us and see that they are welcomed -- for of such is the kingdom of God.

We can't go home again. There is no garden, only history. We live between the gates - between the shut and guarded gate of Eden and the still resisting but ultimately vulnerable gates of hell. What more could we ask than that?

#### CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, help us to dig in where we are  
- as those who have heard the  
promise and believe it.  
Leaving the results to Thee,  
keep us faithful to the  
vision of a world one day  
redeemed and whole.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Ellwood, Robert S., Religious and Spiritual Groups In Modern America, p.115, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973
2. Tillich, Paul, Systematic Theology, Vol. II, p. 34, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1957
3. Farrell, William E., "THE NEW YORK TIMES," p. 15, February 10, 1975
4. Madden, Myron C., The Power to Bless, p. 103, Abingdon Press, New York, 1970

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