
Where Are You: From Blame to Responsibility

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 5, Year B

You may have heard this Genesis reading before. It's part of a big story, about big things—the very beginning of things. And it has a *big* reputation. It's one of the most famous—and infamous—story in the Bible! Indeed, it's so well-known, and so much has been said about it—for better and, sadly, a lot of worse—that it can be hard to hear the story beneath all the layers of interpretation. That it can be hard for some of us to hear it at all.

Or so I discovered, or remembered, when I used this story to open a women's retreat, and it was less-than-warmly received. That's putting it mildly. There was an open revolt!

I had forgotten what a stumbling block it can be, because I had wrestled with it over the years and come to love it. I love its poetry and imagery, its earthiness and humanity. I love it because it is so *true*. Not in the sense that it's a scientifically verifiable or historically accurate account of the beginning of the world, or of sin, or of the snake's leg-lessness. It's true in the way that good poetry, good literature, a good story is true: it shows us something we recognize or resemble.

The story begins before our reading, of course. It begins at the beginning, when God fashioned a man—human being—from the earth, plopped him down in a luscious garden in Eden, provided everything he needed, and gave him a great responsibility: to till and keep the garden. God gave him freedom too, with limits, and guidance: "You are free," God said, "to eat of every tree of the garden, *except* for one, the tree of knowledge, good and evil." Which only makes that the most desirable tree in the garden!

Then God fashioned a companion, and they became "man" and "woman," and were naked and not ashamed... until this serpent reminded the woman about that tree and awakened her desire to be wise, to explore, to see and know and grow.

"The woman saw it," scripture says, "took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate." That's it! The whole momentous decision—that action that has come to be known as "The Fall"—narrated in one swift line.

The narrative emphasis is on what happens *afterwards*, when the Lord comes walking through the garden in the cool of the day, and they hide. So God calls out, "Where are you?" Adam dances all around a direct answer: "I heard you and I was afraid, for I was naked, and I hid." So God tries again, asking point-blank: "Have you eaten from the tree I told you not to?" But Adam hides, again: "The woman *you* gave me, *she* gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

With Adam abdicating responsibility, God turns to the woman next. Maybe she'll be braver. Maybe she's the grown-up here. So God asks her, "What is this *you* have done?" But she, too, passes the buck: "The *serpent* tricked me! And I ate."

God is giving them a chance, a choice, to stand up and respond, "Here I am. Yes, I did it. It was me. I'm sorry. Now what?" But they don't. Afraid of the consequences of their actions, afraid of their freedom to choose and their power to right or wrong, afraid of God or of disappointing or being rejected by God, they choose blame instead.

The story continues, of course. There are consequences. Big ones. Things will be different now. There is mercy, too. And new life. God sews fig-leaf clothing for them. The woman, this same woman, is named Eve,

the mother of the living.

The story continues today, too. That's how we know it's true! We're still pointing fingers: "It's their fault!" Children are still arguing, "He hit me! She hit me first!"—as if that justified everything that follows.

Adults are equally good at the blame-game. Maybe even better! At least, *this* one is. So many arguments with my husband disintegrate into this familiar search for the original offense: "You started it; I'm just reacting"—as if I had no choice in the matter. As if my spouse's actions inevitably determined my own. As if admitting that I maybe could have been in the wrong myself would undo me. Us. That's the real fear, after all.

But we aren't alone, are we? Everywhere I turn, it seems that people are offloading responsibility like a hot potato—onto partners, parents, colleagues. Onto upbringing, circumstances, genes, institutions, leaders. Leaders are a time-honored target!

The blame-game is writ large in so many of the national and global conflicts, also, with each side focusing on what the other has done or is doing wrong, rather than on what they themselves can do right.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman calls this "blame displacement," which he defines as "casting blame outward rather than taking responsibility for one's own condition."^[1] It is "a flight from challenge"^[2] and a distraction from one's own responsibility—from one's own ability to respond. It is an indication, Friedman says, of "societal regression," or the "lowering of maturity."^[3]

In the midst of fear and anxiety—or of tragic, inexplicable loss—blame gives a sense of control. If we can isolate the problem, and pin it on someone or something, then we have an easy fix: get rid of that someone or something! But that control, with that overly simplistic view of life, is an illusion.

What blame displacement really fosters is helplessness and hopelessness in the face of circumstances or of other people's actions. What's more: a blame culture suffocates the kind of self-awareness, honest dialogue, and emotional and spiritual maturity that can lead to transformation and reconciliation. It stifles leadership and the kind of risk-taking that leads to discovery and growth. The kind of risk-taking, ironically, that we see in Eve.

The story that Genesis tells is not one of helpless determinism. And it's not about blaming Adam and Eve or the serpent for our sins or for everything wrong in the world. Rather, it's about us: it is a call to us, to the awesome freedom God has given us, and the responsibility that goes with it.

Another rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, says, "The only antidote to fear is responsibility: the refusal to believe that there is nothing we can do, the decision never to take refuge in blaming others, making them the scapegoats for our frustrations and fears. Courage is born the moment we decide not to complain but instead to make a personal protest against the evils of the world by doing good, however slight."^[4]

Yes, responsibility takes courage, and builds courage. When we say yes to the responsibility God gives us—when we risk standing up and acting, speaking, deciding—we will get it wrong sometimes. We'll misstep, in small and really big ways. We will cause offense and incur guilt, and there will be consequences. Because what we do and don't do matters. A lot.

This mattering—this responsibility—is a heavy burden if we believe it's all up to us, and only us, especially given what a mess most of us are. And that brings us back to God. To come out of hiding, we have to trust God—and God's guidance, and God's mercy—God's "merciful guidance." We trust in God, who comes looking for us, too, when we're hiding from the problems we see, or the pain we feel, or the responsibility we have for our lives and others. God, who asks not in condemnation but in love, "Where are you?"

Where. Are. You?

^[1] Edwin Friedman, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Seabury, 2007), 76.

^[2] Friedman, 84.

^[3] Friedman, 54.

^[4] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Schocken, 2007), 270.

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