

“My Least Favorite Story”  
Genesis 3:1-24

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This month in worship we have been exploring different animal stories in the Old Testament. So far we have heard how God speaks through the very big fish that swallowed Jonah and the not-so-stubborn donkey that stopped Balaam in the road. I'm enjoying this series, in part because sometimes it's more fun to preach on frogs than it is to preach on Pharisees, and also because I'm such an animal lover. Many of you know that I am in love with just about every animal I meet with one exception: snakes. I'm not going to try to explain the fear to those of you who love them, but know that they are just the worst kind of animal in the whole world. Know, too, that by being afraid of them I am in good company.

In polls about what people fear the most, snakes routinely top the list. More people are afraid of snakes than they are heights, spiders, public speaking, airplanes or needles. In fact, if you put all the people together who are afraid of dogs, thunder and lightning, going to the doctor, and the dark—it still wouldn't be as big a gathering as all the people who are afraid of snakes. I am a little queasy just saying the word “snake” this many times, but at least I feel vindicated knowing I am not alone in my fear. I'm surrounded by good people who are just as irrational and ridiculous as I am. In fact, I have a theory that the writers of our translation of the Bible, the New Revised Standard Version that we heard today, were also afraid of snakes. I think they named the animal in the Garden of Eden a serpent because it is a little vaguer and leaves those of us who are afraid the ability to imagine that surely they must be talking about something other than a snake, like a nice garden dragon. But we've all read the picture book Bible. We know it's a snake.

It's precisely because I don't like snakes that I felt compelled to take on the one in the Garden of Eden. I might not be willing to walk into a reptile house in a zoo, but at least I can work up enough

bravery to talk about one little snake who hasn't been around for thousands and thousands of years.

When it comes to the Garden of Eden, the snake tends to take all the blame. When God realizes that Adam and Eve have eaten from the forbidden tree, God asks them why they would do that. Adam quickly says, “Eve made me do it!” and Eve replies, “That snake made me do it!” I imagine Adam and Eve looking quite foolish, each pointing a finger at someone else, simultaneously trying to cover up, while the snake just sits there, looks at God, and shrugs.

As much as I understand Adam and Eve's impulse to blame the snake on their troubles, I don't think it is the snake's fault—at least not primarily it's fault. It is true that the snake tempted Eve. It is true that Eve said, “God told us not to eat that fruit” and the snake replied by explaining what would happen if they did eat the fruit from the tree—that they wouldn't die or be harmed in the way they feared. It is true that the snake was a tempter who tried to its hardest to sway Eve away from God's instructions. But the snake still did not force Eve to eat from the tree. There were no threats. There was no coercing. There was no real trickery. The snake tempted, but Eve acted on her own. She made the decision, she ate the fruit. And, so did Adam. Eve tempted, but Adam chose to eat the fruit. They were both responsible for the damage they caused—and they both knew they were disobeying God's will. Ultimately, it wasn't really the snake's fault.

In the Garden of Eden, the snake becomes the scapegoat. That human tendency we all share today that makes us want to blame someone or something else for our troubles started all the way back at the beginning with Adam and Eve. We can all relate to their predicament—if we are being honest with ourselves we know that it is a lot easier to point fingers than is to look within ourselves and admit our responsibility when we mess up. For example, when our work is criticized it is easier to say that our boss is a tyrant who doesn't understand us than to admit we have areas where we can grow. When our spouse asks us why we didn't buy everything on the grocery list, it is easier to say the darn kids distracted us rather than admit we forgot to write it down.

In moments so small they probably happen without us realizing, from the moment Eve and

Adam defied God, scapegoat other people has become a part of our every day lives. It makes life easier in a lot of ways. When we are tired or frustrated or feeling guilty, blaming someone else becomes a way of letting ourselves off the hook and able to move on without having to face that guilt or make a change in our behavior. A lot of times it is harmless. There are many examples where pointing the blame somewhere else doesn't really hurt the other person. They might never know. Sure, it might slowly, quietly, chip away at us on the inside, but we certainly don't notice and by and large it seems to leave us consequence free.

However, there are other times when creating a scapegoat instead of facing the harder truth inside of ourselves because hugely harmful. It has a ripple effect of hurting those who are blamed AND those who do the blaming AND it hurts any of us unlucky enough to be around to witness it. It causes real pain. Making a scapegoat has real consequences. Unfortunately, we have seen an example of that play out this week in our country. It is hard to talk about, and we don't talk about it often, but these events are important to consider in light of how we scapegoat and blame others.

A week ago, Michael Brown was shot and killed on a city street, in the middle of the day, in Ferguson, Missouri. And because Michael was a black teenager who was killed by a white man, he became the scapegoat as our country watched and tried to understand how this could happen. In the initial reports, people asked, "What was he doing when he was shot? Was he aggressive? Did he have a weapon? Surely he must have done something to provoke this. Was he throwing up gang signs or was he wearing something that indicated he was looking for trouble? What did Michael Brown do to get himself killed?"

We have been conditioned to ask these questions. We have come to expect them, and we look to the media outlets to help us make sense of this murder...What we have a harder time identifying and admitting to ourselves is that this process and these questions are a form of racism that creeps into every town and city in this country. We have a harder time admitting that when yet another black man is killed by a white man and we question and doubt the one who is dead before we question the one

who is alive, that is racism. It is stealthy. It is subtle. It is hidden under the layers of how we understand our society to work. And, it is not okay.

When we hear these stories of sons and husbands and brothers named Michael Brown and Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin and hundreds of others whose names are still surfacing, our response as a country is to blame the victim. We become Adam and Eve, pointing our fingers, trying to convince God that it was the snake's fault. We try, only fooling ourselves, to turn our black brothers into serpents. We make these men, some of them only boys, our scapegoats. We want to believe they did something to provoke their killer because then we don't have to take a hard look at race and race relations and racism in America or in Missouri or New York or Connecticut or Glastonbury. We want to believe that there is a way to make sense of these tragedies so that we don't have to question our role or our complicity in a system that allows this violence to happen, and allows it to happen overwhelmingly to young black men.

I found myself complicit to this kind of racism this week when I caught myself asking whether or not I needed to talk about Michael Brown in worship this week. I have so far removed myself from the conflict of race in this country and in our own community that I found myself with a choice—I could ignore it and pretend that it was going away or I could finally admit that America has a racism problem, and as a white American, so do I.

A teenager lost his life, a city is thrown into turmoil, all around this country, including our very own town, there are black women and men and boys and girls who fear for their lives every single day. If I believe that the humanity and the life of one person is wrapped up and intimately tied to the lives and humanity of every other person, I can no longer be silent. We can no longer blame the victim, or chalk this up to a random act of violence or an accident. We have to look at the larger systems that are at play. We have to acknowledge the ways we are a part of that system.

It makes sense to me that all these thousands of years later, so many of us would still be afraid of snakes. We keep telling ourselves this story about Adam and Eve getting kicked out of the garden

and in the version we continue to tell, it was the snake's fault. If only that snake had left Eve alone, we might still be living it up in the paradise of that garden. But what we really know is that the snake in that garden has followed us out of the garden and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The snake holds up the mirror to our eyes, so that we can better see the places and the people we don't want to face—so that we can better see the consequences of blaming others. The snake reminds us that God calls us to live with integrity and that means owning our actions, owning our inactions, and stopping this cycle of blaming and scapegoat innocent people for things and situations that we helped cause.

That is an animal worth fearing because once you see the snake for what it is, a truth-teller, and once you realize you have no one to blame, not even a snake, for the troubles in this world, life gets a little more real. And a little more honest. And a lot more scary. The Good News is that slowly, by facing the hurt and pain and guilt that we carry inside us, God will begin to heal us. God will heal us little by little, until we arrive at a place that is better than Eden: a place where we have made it through the pain and violence and hurt and blame and have finally come to a place of reconciliation and love and wholeness; a place of hope and peace and justice. When we will come to a place where no person, no matter what the color of their skin is, has anything to fear.