

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Genesis 3:1-13 ("The First Sin and its Punishment")

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Sing to the Lord a joyful song (CH:184)

Give thanks with a grateful heart (CH:180)

Take up your Cross, the Saviour said (CH:402)

Sunday marks the first of our short summer services in person and via Zoom and YouTube, looking at "Fifty Years of BBC Thoughts for the Day". Meanwhile, The Sunday Focus will be offering different sermons from the past, starting today with one from 2011.

What are we to do as we open up our Bibles? How are we to understand what the words meant when they were written, and what they mean now? Are we to be like biblical fundamentalists, believing that every last comma and full stop is part of the inerrant, divinely inspired Word of God? Or are we to be like the atheist and dismiss the whole lot as though it's all a load of nonsense?

The biblical scholar Marcus Borg cared passionately about communicating the Christian faith in a sensible and coherent way that can speak with integrity to readers in our own time. Sometimes, however, that can pose difficulties. Turning to our reading today from Genesis chapter 3, we encounter all sorts of weird and wonderful things: a talking snake; a tree with forbidden fruit; sudden realisations of nakedness; and the depiction of God as one who can be heard walking in a garden.

What exactly are we reading here? If we choose to address that question very quickly we can come see that this is a folk tale. If, however, we choose not to address that question at all, might we be missing out on deeper understanding?

In his book, "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time", Borg speaks about how as a young boy he took Genesis literally. Then, as he grew older (perhaps as a teenager) he thought a bit more about that talking snake, the forbidden fruit and all the rest. He started to doubt that there was ever a historical Adam and a historical Eve, and those perfectly right and proper doubts threatened to make his entire faith untenable. Eventually, though, as an adult, he was able to see the early chapters of Genesis for what they are: folk tales, told for a very particular purpose – a metaphorical purpose – and his view of the Bible changed. Here's what Borg says:

"I now see these chapters quite differently. Reading them ... with sensitivity to their meanings as metaphorical narratives has enabled me once again to see them as profoundly true stories. ... They are not God's stories of the world's beginnings; rather, they are ancient Israel's stories of the world's beginnings."

What Borg is saying is that we can find truth in story, without having to find any kind of facts at all. If we are to learn from the book of Genesis, it's OK for us to see its opening chapters as "myth", because that's what they are.

The beginning of the Bible, then, is to be read as myth. But what does that mean? In religious terms a myth is a really important thing. As Borg is quick to point out, a myth is not an explanation. A myth is not a primitive form of science. Equally, a myth is not a mistaken belief. Rather, a myth is a story which speaks between our world and the sacred. It helps put into words the kind of things for which there really are no adequate words whatsoever.

Thousands of years ago, iron-age humans knew nothing of The Big Bang, radio-astronomy, nuclear physics, and so on. That said, as ancient people in a pre-scientific world, the writers of folk-tales did their best to come to terms with those aspects of life which they found downright mystifying, not least, of course, the beginnings of everything. And one way of doing this was through story-telling. So then, we see that myth is quite like poetry: poetry that points to a deep truth. As Borg so helpfully says in his book: "myth is poetry plus, not science minus".

Borg holds that the poetry of Genesis can teach us that God is the Creator. Borg quotes one of his seminary professors: "The only literal statement in Genesis 1 is 'God created the heavens and the earth'."

The writers of Genesis very clearly believe that at the centre and source of all that is, we find not an accident, not a mathematical probability, but the mystery that is God: the God who creates out of love. God exists, and the Creation story puts that assertion at the very heart of its narrative. More than this, Genesis affirms that God is good, and that what God makes is good too. The story spells this out for us: after every stage of God's creative process, God looked at what he had made – "And God saw that it was good".

It is Genesis that comes out with the staggering thought that human beings are "made in the image of God". That's quite a statement to make, and it's a metaphorical statement. If God the creator is Spirit, it follows that we cannot possibly look like something that - *someone who!* - is invisible. Yet the phrase speaks so eloquently of humans being able to look to God as the template of their being. If you want to know what an amazing creature the human being really is, then look no further than at a tiny baby and think of God, who creates, who cares, who nurtures and who inspires. "We are small," says Borg, "we are finite, we are mortal. And yet there is something different about us."

Now, it would be easy at this point for us to do the conventional thing – the expected thing. We could so easily just wring our hands in a proper Presbyterian way and say that our "difference" is that we are failing creatures; that we're flawed to the very core and incapable in our own human strength of anything but wickedness. But how true - and how helpful? - is that assessment? In focusing on our many inadequacies, might we be missing a greater truth: one which points us in the direction of a Creator who creates amazing things?

Consider this point: that great hero of the faith, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, declared that we are "made for goodness". To illustrate what he means, Tutu points us to news programmes on the TV. We see terrible things happening all over the world, and we are appalled. The reason we are appalled is that *we are made for good*.

Brave words there, from a brave man.

Let's finish with the passage which rounds off Marcus Borg's thinking on the creation myths. Borg closes this chapter with a very concise assessment of what the Bible gives us as a whole collection of books:

"The rest of the Bible is to a large extent the story (and stories) of this state of affairs: the human predicament and its solution. Our lives east of Eden are marked:

- by exile, and we need to return and reconnect;
- by bondage, and we need liberation;
- by blindness and deafness, and we need to see and hear again;
- by fragmentation, and we need wholeness;
- by violence and conflict, and we need to learn justice and peace;
- by self- and other-centeredness, and we need to center in God.

Such are the claims of Israel's stories of human beginnings."

And such ... are the claims upon us. May we return to God: to reconnect; to be liberated; to "see" and "hear" anew; to find wholeness; to learn justice and peace; to find our centre in God. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord God,
as we dedicate these our financial gifts for the work of your church,
we also bring our hands, our feet and our talents to build bridges:
of hope, of love and of healing in our community and our nation.
We bring before you those that we too easily label as 'different'.
Help us to recognise the beauty of human diversity on our earth.
Help us to truly be 'one in Christ', to act justly, kindly and open-handedly.
We pray for our political leaders, that they would govern and legislate with justice,
mercy and compassion.
We pray for the welfare and safety of migrants
faced with difficult and terrifying choices,
often at the mercy of people smugglers.
Lord, help us to understand the complexity of the geo-political forces
that mean families and individuals feel they have no future or choice
other than to enter a small dinghy or an overcrowded vessel.
Lord, make us instruments of your peace:
hands and feet building bridges of hope, love and healing.
All these prayers we ask in your name. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

"Sing @ 6.30": Gladsmuir Parish Church's next evening service will take place on Sunday 23rd July at 6.30pm, when we will be welcoming back the virtuosic classical guitarist Ben Kearsley. This act of worship will offer a wonderful opportunity to contemplate in the peace of a beautiful historic building, with soft music and a short biblical quiet reflection from our Lay Pastor, Frances Cunningham. All are welcome. Admission freedom with a retiring offering to benefit Christian Aid.

Prayer and contemplation: Tuesdays from 2-3pm in the Longniddry Church sanctuary. Peace, quiet and space in which to reflect in the presence of God.

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. This is for anyone who might like to exercise their mind and body while making new friends. All ages and levels of physical ability most welcome.

Wednesday Club: Wednesdays from 2.30-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy fun activities, entertainment, chat, tea/coffee. (Contact Janet 07766574123)

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am - 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along, listen and share sporting memories with other older sports fans.