

## **Sin: We Missed the Mark**

Pastor Vern Christopherson

### **Genesis 3:1-23**

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?’”<sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;<sup>3</sup>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.’”<sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die;<sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>6</sup>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.<sup>7</sup>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.

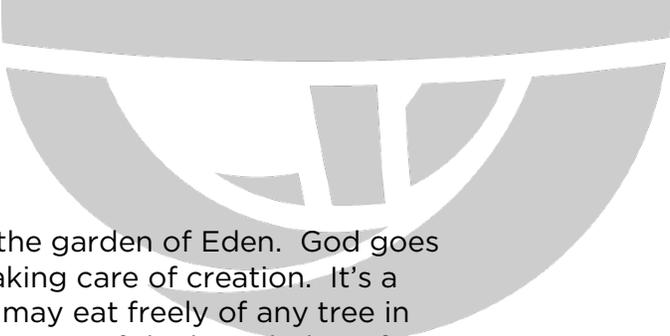
<sup>8</sup>They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.<sup>9</sup>But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”<sup>10</sup>He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”<sup>11</sup>He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”<sup>12</sup>The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”<sup>13</sup>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.”<sup>14</sup>The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.<sup>15</sup>I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”<sup>16</sup>To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

<sup>17</sup>And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;<sup>18</sup>thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

<sup>19</sup>“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

<sup>20</sup>The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live.<sup>21</sup>And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife and clothed them.

<sup>22</sup>Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—<sup>23</sup>therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.



In the creation story in Genesis 2, Adam is placed in the garden of Eden. God goes out on a limb and gives Adam the responsibility of taking care of creation. It's a big assignment. As a part of it, Adam is told that he may eat freely of any tree in the garden, with one exception. He's not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a little later, when Adam finally gets a suitable partner, we can assume that the same prohibition applies to Eve as well.

So how do Adam and Eve do with this assignment? Not very well. You know this story. Something called "sin" enters the picture. Any number of metaphors are used to describe it - disobedience, transgression, falling short of God's intentions for us. But perhaps few metaphors put it as simply as this: *sin is missing the mark*. God sets a limit. Adam and Eve don't like it. So they say no. They sound a little like spoiled three-year-olds. Suddenly everything starts going haywire in this pristine place called Eden.

To help get a sense of what missing the mark might mean, I've asked Ben Limburg to come forward. Ben is a kicker on the Lourdes football team. He's a senior. He takes his job seriously and he's very good at it.

Ben, tell me:

How do you get ready to kick a field goal or an extra point?

What does it feel like when the ball goes through the uprights?

I don't want to jinx you or anything, but do you ever miss the mark?

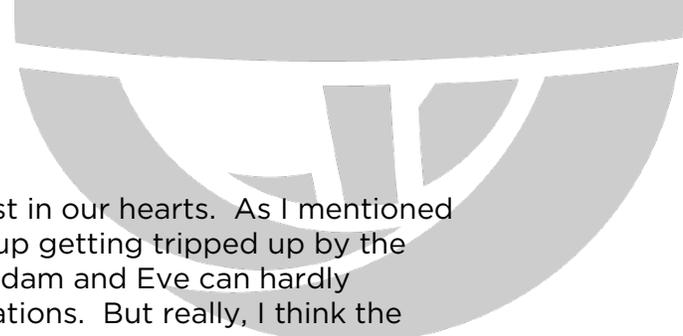
*Let's see how Ben does with a football.*

Obviously missing a field goal - if Ben ever misses one - would not be a sin, but breaking a promise is, or telling a lie, or acting like a bully. In today's world, "sin" is often looked upon as a downer. God is pictured as someone who blames and shames, and if you don't get your act together, then God is ready and willing to punish you.

Whether we like this image of God or not, I have no doubt there are consequences when we miss the mark: people get hurt, relationships get strained and sometimes broken, and this little garden called Earth can suffer untold harm. Even as we mention the consequences, though, I think it's important that we not view sin only as individual actions. Sin is first and foremost a condition, a pervasive, human condition. We've all got it. And let's be honest: it's not really Adam and Eve's fault.

I remember hearing the creation story when I was growing up. There was a certain wistfulness about it for me. If only man and woman had done what God commanded.... If only they hadn't eaten that fruit... If only they didn't get kicked out of the garden....then we wouldn't be in the mess we're in today. When I read the story that way, I was missing the point. That is, we've all eaten from that tree. More specifically, we've all struggled with the limits of being creatures. As the story says: we want to be *like God*.





The serpent is very good at sowing seeds of mistrust in our hearts. As I mentioned last week, if we take this story literally, we can end up getting tripped up by the details. The serpent becomes some sort of devil. Adam and Eve can hardly contain themselves when faced with his wily temptations. But really, I think the words of the serpent could just as well be words out of our own hearts. We want to be in control. We don't want to have to trust God with our lives. Who knows if God can be trusted anyway? The heart of temptation, it seems, is the willingness to trade what we have right in front of us for the promise of something better. And we do it over and over again.

So, assuming this is not just a story from long ago and far away, but rather a story about us, how are we supposed to make sense of it? I think it's important to remember that sin has a grip on our lives. It's not simply a downer. It's a way to tell the truth about ourselves. You may remember the confession in the green hymnal that went: "We are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves." I'll admit, I never liked the word *bondage*, especially because of the history of slavery in our country, but the point is well-taken. Sin shows up in more ways than we know, and we're often stuck in it.

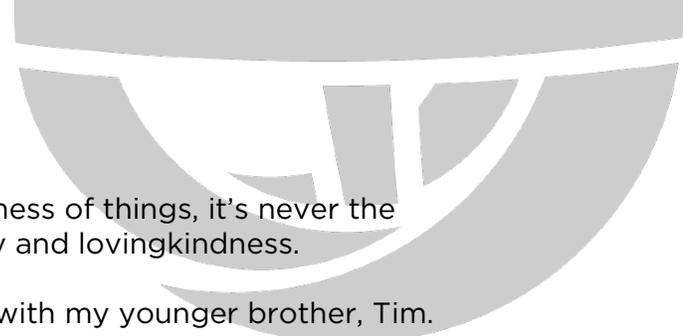
Back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, St. Augustine called sin the "great confusion." He said that God gives us *people* to love and *things* to use, but so often we turn that around: we love *things* and use *people*. Augustine wasn't just talking about the big ones – money, sex, and power – but about all the everyday ways we miss the mark God sets for us. Hopefully, as we take time to name these things, we feel convicted. Maybe we need God more than we know.

A second way to make sense of this story is closely related to the first. In his book, *Making Sense of the Christian Faith*, David Lose speaks of the "God-shaped hole" that's part of the human condition. Adam and Eve are incomplete on their own. Yet they push God to the side and declare their independence. Pretty soon, everything goes wrong. They hide from God, and start pointing fingers at each other, and even blame God for giving them each other in the first place. Deep down they know they haven't trusted God as they should. And because of it, the God-shaped hole inside brings an ache all its own.

Don't we do this sometimes: Don't we leave God out of the picture? And try too hard to be in control? And struggle to trust what God has in store for us? If so, maybe we know something about the ache of that God-shaped hole too.

A third way to make sense of this story: After Adam and Eve eat from the tree and suffer the consequences, they are forced to leave the garden. But don't miss what happens next. The Lord makes garments of skin for them and clothes them. It's a tender moment at a tumultuous time. Clearly, this is not simply a story about missing the mark, and the blame and shame which follows. It's a story about the human condition. And here's the surprise: God graciously reaches out to humanity in their brokenness and continues to care for them. That's a theme that will be repeated over and over in the Bible, starting with Israel and going all the way to





Jesus. No matter how often God's people make a mess of things, it's never the end of the story. God regularly show up with mercy and lovingkindness.

A little over a month ago, I shared a text exchange with my younger brother, Tim. Tim began the text: "Any chance you'd be available for golf on Saturday morning?" I replied: "I better say no. I'm preaching this weekend and that will be prime sermon-writing time for me." I continued: "You wouldn't have a tee-time for tomorrow afternoon - that would be Sunday afternoon - would you?" Tim responded: "Umm. In the morning. Sorry." And I replied, "You heathen!" What are big brothers for, right? But Tim came right back, "I live by grace. You should try it sometime." I commend him: "Good Lutheran answer. Our dad would be proud." Now, it's not that I was envious or anything - I love my job - but I asked him: "So, pray tell, where will you be playing in all your glorious freedom *on Sunday morning?*" He shared the name of the course. It was a good one, Stoneridge. And then he added that he and his friend were taking their sons out one last time before they headed off to college. After Tim included that, even a wisecracking older brother had very little left to say.

So, what do you think, was my brother missing the mark God set for him? I don't really think so. Then again, if he always worshipped on the golf course and nowhere else, then maybe sin would have a bigger grip on his life, and he would be missing something important. Maybe he would even come to feel a God-shaped hole in his heart, an ache that only God could fill. If so, I have no doubt that in the midst of any potential consequences, God would find a way - just like God does with Adam and Eve - to show mercy and lovingkindness too.

Isn't this the story of you and me? We are made in the image of God. But along the way we miss the mark, and declare our independence from our creator, and put way too much trust in ourselves. It's called sin. It's part of the human condition. But here's the good news: God will never give up on us, of that I am sure. Amen.





