

Text: Genesis 3:8-24

Title: **"Grace Outrunning the Avalanche of Sin"** (6th in a series of sermons in Genesis 1-11: "The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories")

What we just read has to be one of the saddest stories ever told. A number of you have said to me, that after reading Genesis 3:8-24, you felt profoundly sad. And rightly so. For in this story, we are reading the collapsing of God's good world. The Living God had, out of love and great joy, brought humanity into being in Paradise. The Living God had, with deep affection and much delight, formed us to live in a four-fold relational harmony. The Creator – blessed be His Name! – made us for a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with God. And in this story in Genesis 3, the four-fold relational harmony is falling apart, quickly unraveling. "Unraveling" is a euphemism for "dying".

I think what makes the story so sad is that we are seeing the story played out in our time right before our very eyes in terribly sad ways. The headlines this week alone confirm that the Genesis text is speaking truth, sad truth.

BUT...sad as the sad story is, the fact that the story is told is a grace. The fact that the God, who sings the joyful story of Genesis 1, and tells the happy story of Genesis 2, also bothers to tell the sad story of Genesis 3, is, in all of itself, a grace.

It is?

Yes. For the story is telling us that every person alive today implicitly feels. The story is telling us that things are not now the way things are supposed to be. The story is telling us that the breakdown of the four-fold relational harmony is not the way things are supposed to be. The text is describing death. And the text is telling us that death is not supposed to be. And just knowing this fact is, in all of itself, a grace.

G.K. Chesterton, the witty philosopher-theologian of the early 20th century, puts it best. He is wrestling with the phrase "the best of all possible worlds," a phrase coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1710, "Essays of the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Eve"). Leibniz, and others, argued that since the Creator is good, and since the Creator is all-powerful, He must have chosen this world for us as "the best of all possible worlds." Chesterton wrestles with this, because he feels, as most humans have felt and feel, that this can't be "the best of all possible worlds." In his book *Orthodoxy* – which I highly commend to you – he writes: "The modern philosopher had told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the wrong place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in the spring." He continues: "I heard that good was not merely a tool to be used, but a relic to be guarded, like the goods from [Robinson] Crusoe's ship – even that had been the wild whisper of something originally wise, for, according to Christianity, we were indeed the survivors of a wreck, the crew of a golden ship that had gone down before the beginning of the world." Then Chesterton says: "But the important matter was this, that it entirely reversed the reason

for optimism. And the instant the reversal was made, it felt like the abrupt ease when a bone is put back in the socket. I often called myself an optimist, to avoid the too evident blasphemy of pessimism. But all the optimism of the age had been false and disheartening for this reason, that it had always been trying to prove that we fit into the world. The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do not fit in to the world (as it is)" (80).

This is not the world for which we were made. It is a fallen world. And as sad as that realization is, knowing this is, in and of itself, a grace. For it justifies the longing in the human spirit for a better world. One that the Bible says once was. One that the Bible says one day will be.

The way things are is not the way things are supposed to be. That's the good news of Genesis 3.

This, by the way, is why we cannot base our ethics on "the way things are." Ethical choices and behavior cannot be based on "the way things are," because "the way things are" is not the way things are meant to be.

As sad as the story told in Genesis 3 is, the fact that it is told is a grace.

And...as sad as the story is, it is full of grace. It is full of grace for the survivors of the shipwreck. Full of grace? Yes! You are, as the text describes, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the avalanche of sin" – the quickly moving disintegration of the four relationships for which we were originally made - ...as the text painfully describes the avalanche of sin, it also describes the quickly moving grace of God. Indeed, the text is telling us that grace is outrunning the avalanche of sin!

Although all four relationships break down, there is grace – God's unmerited blessing – in all four. Yes, Paradise is lost. The garden becomes a cemetery: "dust to dust, ashes to ashes." A fact with which we are all too painfully aware. But...in the cemetery there are all kinds of amazing signs of life, because in the cemetery God is extending all kinds of amazing grace.

So...let us go back through the story two times. The first time, let us take seriously the way the text describes the avalanche of sin. The second time, let us also take seriously the way the text describes grace outrunning the avalanche. "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear" – first reading; "And grace my fears relieved" – second reading.

Quick review. In the original Paradise, the Living God gave humanity only one command. Only one. A good command. "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat from it, you shall surely die." We learned that the one command is so good because we do not need "the knowledge of good and evil." We learned (with the help of Daniel Fuller) that to the first readers of Genesis, "the knowledge of good and evil" referred to the kind of knowledge that makes one think he or she can live

independently of anyone else. To aspire to “the knowledge of good and evil” is to aspire to be one’s own master, one’s own lord, one’s own god. It is to aspire to be the captain of one’s own ship. God warned the first humans...and all their subsequent offspring...that as glorious as we humans are, we are not able to be our own gods. “In the day you aspire to be the captain of your own ships, you will die...the ship will wreck.”

The enemy of God, the serpent, the embodiment of evil, comes into the picture and starts messing with the first humans’ minds, as he tries to do with all their subsequent offspring. He twists God’s good command in ways that raise suspicion about the goodness and generosity of God. The first humans, sadly, buy into the serpent’s twisting, and conclude that they must have “the knowledge of good and evil.” They strike out on their own, to make life on the earth work by themselves. They decide they do not need to remain in a dependent relationship with the Creator.

And the result is what we read in Genesis 3. All four relationships unravel. Death enters God’s good world.

Thus, the avalanche.

Our relationship with God unravels. What was a relationship of trust, delight, love, intimacy, is now marked by suspicion, doubt, fear, guilt.

Genesis 3, verse 8. “...and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” They hid themselves. So terribly sad.

Note: God had not even spoken to Adam and Eve. They simply heard, as the text puts it, “the sound of the LORD God walking in the cool of the day.” A sound they had heard many times before. A sound that had filled their hearts with joy. “The LORD is drawing near!!!” But now, having disobeyed the one good command, having moved out of the proper posture of creature dependent on the Creator, the sound of the Living God walking in the garden made them afraid, and they felt ashamed. They try to hide.

So too all of Adam’s and Eve’s offspring. We all try to hide. Oh, there is a sense in which we all seek God; for the deepest recesses of our being long for the Creator and Sustainer of our lives. But sadly, the characteristic human posture is actually one of hiding (J. Barrie Shepherd, “Encounters: Poetic Meditations on the Old Testament,” 71). We sense the gentle stirring of God’s movement in our lives and we hide.

We try to hide under noise. We keep the radio and television on. We keep the ipod plugged into our ears. Yes, sometimes for good reasons. But, also, often as an unconscious attempt to silence the sounds of God walking in the places where we live and work.

We try to hide in our busy-ness. Yes, often, we are super active because we really care about others, or because we are alive with creative ideas and energy. But often we stay busy so we do not have to deal with the sound of the Creator moving around us.

We hide through chemicals. We use alcohol or drugs to drown out the sound of the Wholly Other.

We hide behind skepticism. There certainly are real intellectual challenges involved in trusting God. And I do not want to minimize them. But often we use the challenges as excuses not to believe. Not because of a lack of evidence...but because our hearts know that if we believe we will have to change. And we do not want to change.

We hide by not accepting responsibility for our choices. When God does speak, and confronts the first humans about their disobedience, they shift the blame. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. Adam even blames God: "the woman You gave me, she gave me from the tree" (3:12).

The most sophisticated hiding place of all is religion. Religion? It is very subtle. We tend to think that humans design religions as part of our search for the One, True, Living God. And to a degree that is the case. But mostly it is not. The Apostle Paul, commenting, I think, on Genesis 3, says in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.... Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image....They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped all served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:21-23, 25). Because the One, True, Living God is now experienced as a threat, we invent a god with whom we can comfortably live. We shape a god in our image, one who does not upset our lives. We create a god we can handle, who baptizes our own understanding of reality. One church historian even suggests that some churches pay their pastors to protect them from the True God! (Richard Lovelace, "Dynamics of Spiritual Life"). [See R.C. Spoul "If There Is a God, Why Are There Atheists?: A Psychology of Religion"]

What was originally a relationship of trust, delight, love, intimacy, is now marked by suspicion, doubt, fear, guilt, and hiding.

And this then affects the relationship with the self. It too begins to unravel. The separation from God is now carried into the personality as a separation from the self (Francis Schaeffer). Originally we were "naked and not ashamed" (2:25)...integrated and at peace with ourselves. Now it is: "I heard the sound of God walking in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked" (3:10). "Who told you you were naked?" God asked in great sadness. When the Living God is moved out of the centre and we move ourselves into the centre, the break in relationship with God is expressed as break in relationship with self. When we no longer know the Creator as He is, we no longer know ourselves as we are. Psychologists can help me to a degree to understand myself. But my healing will finally come when I move out of the place I was never intended to occupy, and become creature before Creator again.

This alienation from God, resulting in alienation from self, has immediate effects for the relationship with others. Adam blames Eve. And God's good gift of a life-

partner begins to unravel. Instead of accepting responsibility for his own actions and confessing his own guilt, Adam projects it onto Eve. And all the subsequent offspring follow this pattern. We blame parents, culture, the environment. And they do have a role to play. But ultimately, we choose to talk and feel and act the way we do.

The avalanche of sin: Alienation from God and from self results in the breakdown of human community. The relationship between the man and the woman was originally one of trust, care, attentiveness, servanthood, mutuality. And now it is marked by competition and the desire to dominate.

Genesis 3, verse 16: God says to Eve "...your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." The verbs "desire" and "rule" will be used in Genesis 4, where God will say to Cain, the first born of Adam and Eve, "...sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must rule it." The relationship between the man and the woman – "I will give you a helper suitable for you" – a partner – becomes one in which each seeks to dominate the other. Genesis 3:16... "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you"... is not the way it is supposed to be. God is not pro-scribing...He is de-scribing. God is not proscribing a relationship of dominance; he is, sadly, describing what happens when we disobey the one, good command.

And Genesis 3 then tells us that all the spiritual, psychological, relational alienation, affects the relationship with the earth. It too unravels. The avalanching gathers up the created order in its sweep. The ground is cursed (3:17). And there is pain in childbirth (3:16). Adam now struggles with thorns and thistles as he tills the ground. Eve now endures agony and pain as she brings children to the world. God had said...in Genesis 1 – "be fruitful and multiply" (1:28). Now creation groans to be fruitful. And creatures groan to multiply.

But God. But God "keeps pace with this avalanche" (Bonhoeffer).

So, walk through the sad story a second time. Although the earth no longer works as freely and fruitfully as God designed it to work, it still yields food. An abundance of food. Grace! Every garden that grows in the cemetery is a sign of grace. Every farm yielding produce in a fallen world is a sign of grace. Which is why it is so appropriate that every time we eat we "say grace." God did not have to keep the creative properties of the earth going. God could have left the earth to completely die. The earth still yields food!

Although the relationship between the man and the woman has been damaged, they still want each other. They still care. Every time any relationship works, it is a sign of grace. Every time two people actually get along, it is a sign of grace. Every time a man or woman chooses the way of servanthood, it is a sign of grace. Why does the world...even the unbelieving world...honor people like Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela? They are signs of grace: rejecting the way of dominance and lordship, choosing the way of submission and servanthood.

Notice what the text says when Adam calls his wife Eve. Genesis 3:20: "Now the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." The name "Eve" means "living." Although the relationship is unraveling, Adam still delights in Eve. And he recognizes that although death has entered the world, God still brings forth life. A doctor once told me, "The birth of every baby is a sign that God has not given up on the world."

Grace keeps pace with the avalanche of sin

Although the relationship with the self is now problematic, God meets the humans in their shame, making coverings for their nakedness. What a tender scene! Genesis 3, verse 21. "And the LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." Earlier in Genesis 3, the first humans tried to cover their shame by making clothes out of fig leaves (3:7). Here God goes one better. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, "God does (3:21) for the couple what they cannot do for themselves (3:7). They cannot deal with their shame. But God can, will, and does" ("Genesis," 50).

And then the relationship with God. Full of grace!

God asks the question, "Where are you?" Genesis 3, verse 9: "Where are you?" The point? God still wants the relationship!

God's question is pure grace. Obviously God knows where they are. And where we are. "Where are you?" God asks the question to draw us back into fellowship! Draws us. But because we are afraid and feel such shame, God draws us out of hiding rather than forcing us out of hiding. (Derek Kidner, "Genesis," 70). God could have said: "Adam and Eve, I see you under that bush. Now come out and let us talk." But those words would have driven them further into hiding. Adam would have whispered to Eve, "Shhh...be really still...maybe He will go away." Or God could have said, "Adam and Eve. Come out. I will not hurt you. I still love you." But they would not have believed the words. Guilt drowns out the grace notes in God's voice. So God asks a question; questions have a way of getting past our defenses. It is harder to remain still before a question. "Where are you?" "Where are you?" A huge grace! A sign that God wants to re-establish the relationship of trust and intimacy.

And, as we have already noted, God then clothes the fearful ashamed humans. God does not pull them out of hiding...and make them stand before Him in shame. God does not yank the fig leaves off them making them endure His all-searching gaze. No. Genesis 3:21 "The LORD God made garments of skin...and clothed them." God knows our felt need to hide. So He provides a hiding place in His presence!

"Where are you?" The question calls us out of the darkness into the light. And in the light He covers us! He covers our shame. The prophet Isaiah would later declare: "I will greatly rejoice in Yahweh, my soul will exalt in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness" (61:10).

God's act in the garden-become-cemetery prefigures the gospel of Jesus Christ. For where did God get the skins to cover the first humans? From a dead animal. A death takes place in order to cover their shame and take away their fear. Blood was shed to make God's hiding place for ashamed sinners. Looking at the cross and quoting from the Psalms, the Apostle Paul declares: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered" (Romans 4:7) by the blood of the lamb.

There is more grace! God guards the way to the tree of life (3:24), a massively merciful grace. It is? Yes. For God is protecting us from horrible judgment. God does not want us to go on living in independence, in our fallen state. This is not "the best of all possible worlds," and God does not want us to grab hold of the tree of life... and go on living forever in this "not-best-of-all-possible-worlds." God does not want humans to live forever in alienation from Him, from ourselves, from others, from the earth. So He guards the way to the tree of life. Grace outrunning the avalanche!

And in the garden become a cemetery, the Creator makes a great promise that the Church has for centuries called "the proto-gospel." Genesis 3, verse 15, speaking to the serpent who is rightfully "cursed", God says: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." "He – the seed of the woman – shall bruise you – the serpent – on the head, and you – the serpent – shall bruise him – the seed of the woman – on the heel."

It is in this promise that we most see grace outrunning the avalanche of sin. God is promising that one day, a child of the woman would come and do battle with the serpent. The child would represent the whole human race. And He would come and deal a deathblow to the serpent. The serpent would try to hurt him – "bruise his heel", but in hurting the seed of the woman, would be overcome – "bruise you on the head."

This promise and its fulfillment is what holds the rest of the Bible together. This promise is the thread weaving the rest of the story into the story of grace. From that day on, from the day God made the promise in paradise lost... the question will be: "Who is this seed? Who is this seed of the woman who crushes the head of evil?"

The implication of the promise is that this seed will come and restore the four fold relational harmony for which we were created. This seed, this child, this boy, this man, this Adam, will free us from the power of death and bring us back into relational wholeness.

The longing for the seed is, for me, most passionately expressed by the prophet Isaiah. You have heard his words many times, and will hear them many more times in the weeks to come. "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light... For you will break the yoke of their burden... For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will be on His shoulders. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. And there will be no end to the increase of His government or of (His) peace." (Isaiah 9:2, 4, 6-7)

Then He came – the seed of the woman. Galatians 4:4 – “In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...”!

And right from the beginning of His life on this fallen earth, He faces the rage of the serpent. The serpent tries to crush Him while just a baby through King Herod. The serpent tries to crush Him while an adult through the religious authorities and through the political authorities. On the cross, the serpent thinks he has crushed Him, only to discover – to his horror – that the seed of the woman crushed him!

Which is what Mel Gibson was trying to convey in his movie “The Passion.” If you saw the movie you will remember the snaky, serpenty figure coming in and out of the story. And you will remember that at the very moment Jesus dies, there is a loud scream... and we see the serpent spiraling down into the abyss... screeching in agony. For in the moment the serpent bruised the seed of the woman on the hell, the seed of the woman bruised the serpent on the head.

And remember what else happens in the moment Jesus dies? The writers of the Gospel love to tell it! In the moment Jesus dies, the curtain in the Temple is torn in two from top to bottom. The curtain that guards the way into the Holy of Holies, where the Holy One chooses to dwell. On that curtain were embroidered cherubim, portraying the cherubim God posted in the garden to guard the way to the tree of life. At the moment the seed of the woman dies, the curtain with the cherubim is torn into two. Announcing that the way is now open! For Jesus Christ is humanity as we were supposed to be. He is humanity living in utter, complete dependence on His Father. And in Him, it is safe to eat from the Tree of Life. Indeed... He is the Tree of Life.

And on Easter morning, He stands in the Garden that has become a cemetery. Mary Magdalene does not completely recognize Him. She thinks He is the gardener. And she is right! Not the cemetery gardener on duty that day. But THE Gardener. God the Gardener walks again in the garden, calling Mary... and us... to Himself.

Grace outrunning the avalanche of sin!

So E. Stanley Jones, missionary to India, observes that: “The early Christians did not say in dismay, ‘Look what the world has come to’” – what we say on first reading of Genesis 3 – “but (they said) in delight, ‘Look what has come to the world!’” – what we say on second reading of Genesis 3. “They saw not merely the ruin, but the resources for the construction of the ruin. They saw not merely that sin did abound, but that grace did *much more* abound.”

Jones could say that because that is what the Apostle Paul trumpeted through the collapsing Roman Empire. Romans 5:21: “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”, literally, grace super-abounded. And the next verse: “that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me*

*I was once lost but now am found
was blind but now I see*

Grace will always outrun sin!