

Walking In the Garden at the Time of the Evening Breeze

Hespeler, 6 June 2021 © Scott McAndless – Communion

Genesis 3:8-15, Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

When I was growing up in what is now the City of Toronto, we didn't live all that far from a place called Edwards Gardens. Edwards Gardens was, at that time, a showcase for the parks department of the City of North York. Nestled along the banks of the lazy Wilket Creek. It was, and still is, a beautiful Botanical Garden. It is a peaceful place of colourful flower beds, majestic weeping willows and little waterfalls and fountains, a beautiful and refreshing place.

And, from time to time, especially during the hot summer months, our family would pile into the car after dinner and make the short drive down to Edwards Gardens where we would stroll around for a while. After a hot summer's day, it was a perfect place to go to be refreshed and renewed while you felt the cool breezes and smelled the sweet scent of blossoms. In my heart, the place represents memories of belonging and being a family together and at peace with one another. So I can tell you that there is nothing quite like walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.

God Enjoys the Garden

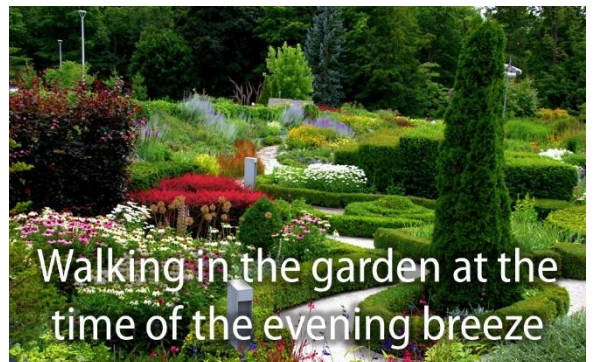
Apparently, God understands the feeling because that is what we discover God doing at the beginning of our reading this morning from the Book of Genesis: **"They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."** It is a wonderful and very human picture of God, isn't it? I mean you can just imagine God after a long, hard day's work running the whole universe feeling the need to relax and unwind in such a refreshing place.

In fact, doesn't it suggest that maybe that is why the garden is there – to provide God with that comforting place of retreat? You can certainly read this passage in Genesis like that. It doesn't say why God planted the garden, but it does strongly imply that it was for God's own rest and enjoyment. And God even created and appointed a gardener to tend it and make it beautiful, just like the City of Toronto hires gardeners for Edwards Gardens.

A Demanding Gardener

But, you know how it is. When you hire workers to make a place like that beautiful, you also have to make sure they have everything they need. And the gardener certainly had his needs. First of all, he was lonely. And so God went to work trying to create some kind of companion for the gardener. God created all sorts of animals and brought them to the man and the man was happy to name them, but, alas, not one of them was found to be the kind of companion that could be his equal.

And I know you've all heard the story about how the best kind of companion was found and, yes, she was not created as a lesser being but rather taken from his side to be his equal and so that they could work together to be the best that they could be.



Everything is Worked Out

And so, God had it all worked out. God had a gardening team who could be glad in their work because they were together and, when God was tired after a long day of running the universe, God could drop by and shoot the evening breeze with the gardener as they walked and talked of begonias and hostas. And all was well and everyone could be at rest and at peace with one another.

And there's a description of just how great things were between them all that comes at the end of that whole story. **"And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed."**

An Anthropomorphic Depiction of God

Now, I realize that some of us may have some problems with how I have told that story, indeed, with how the Book of Genesis tells that story because of the way that it portrays God. The story imagines God strolling around the garden in the evening breezes. It is too anthropomorphic for the taste of some people – God is described in a form that just is too human.

But, of course, that whole description of God doesn't have to mean God literally went strolling in the garden feeling the breezes on his cheeks. It is just that from ancient times, people, not having any other way of imagining a God that they could relate to, resorted to imagining and describing God in very human terms. It was the only way we could manage to talk about God, but that doesn't mean that that is what God is.

What we have in this story is a narrative that people created to help them relate to what they had experienced of God. It may not be literally true that God strolls in the garden, but it is actually a very true description of the kind of relationship God wants with humans like us.

What is Shame?

Which brings us back to that description of how things were supposed to be between the man, the woman and the LORD God. **"And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed."** That tells me something very important. That tells me that it was never God's intention that shame would be something that would disrupt our relationships with one another or with our God.

Now, let's pause here for a moment and just make sure that we all know what we're talking about when we talk about shame. It is something that we have all felt, I know, but is it something that we all truly understand? Let's start with defining the difference between guilt and shame, because that's something we often muddle up.

When you do something wrong, either intentionally or unintentionally, you may feel guilt, especially if you've hurt somebody else in what you have done. This can be a helpful impulse sent from God that is there to push us, when we can, to make things right with somebody that we have hurt. Guilt, as long as it is properly dealt with and not carried around and allowed to fester, has its useful place and, even better, it is ultimately something that God can lift from us so that we do not live in it.

But shame, shame is something different. If guilt is feeling bad for something you've done, shame is feeling bad for who you are or for things about you that are beyond your control. Shame is also something that people will often use to try and manipulate others for their own goals or to make themselves feel better.

Shame is Not a Good Thing

My friends, shame (defined in those terms) is not a good or helpful thing. Oh, I know that sometimes people try and make it a good thing. They will even decry the lack of shame in some people as if this was a terrible thing: “Oh, the young people have no shame these days!” They like to pretend that shame is something that impels people to be better, but it actually rarely does. I have also noticed how, though people are often happy to wish shame on other people, very few seem to wish it upon themselves!

But this story in Genesis makes it quite clear that shame was never intended to be part of how we relate to each other or to God. And, far from a lack of shame being a cause of disobedience or wrong action, we discover in this story that it is the other way around and that shame comes from disobedience.

The Invention of Shame

But that takes us back to our opening scene when God is strolling in the garden in the evening breezes and God is looking for some companionship, God wants to talk to the gardener and shoot the breezes about the hostas and the begonias. But the gardener and his lovely wife are no place to be found. They are hiding and they are hiding because they have discovered something: they have discovered shame.

In fact, shame is such a new invention that they don't even know what to call it. Did you notice that? When God calls them out, all they can say is, **“I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”** What they are afraid of is that, because they are exposed and cannot hide themselves, they will be judged for who they are. That particular fear is what we call shame, they just don't have a word for it yet.

And the LORD God responds to that and says, **“Who told you that you were naked?”** Listen to that question because there is so much meaning wrapped up in it. **“Who told you that you were naked?”** means, “who told you that you were exposed?” It means, more importantly, “Who told you that you had anything to be ashamed of?”

But that is the power of shame. Before, they had been quite naked – utterly exposed both in body but also in terms of being completely unafraid to show the whole world exactly who they were in every way. When LORD comes to the garden looking for the gardeners, nothing has changed about them. They are still the very same people that they were before. All that has changed is that shame has come into the picture.

Shame and the Knowledge of Good and Evil

We could certainly ask where that sense of shame came from. Is it there because they have been disobedient to what was commanded of them? Possibly, but the story doesn't actually say that. I find it's a little bit more likely that shame has been introduced because new knowledge has come to them – the knowledge of good and evil, which is what the tree represents.

Now, knowledge, and especially the knowledge that allows us to discern between good and evil is a good thing. In Jewish tradition, it is the kind of knowledge that makes a person an adult, somebody who is responsible for the consequences of their own decisions. But it is also a kind of knowledge that

unlocks a certain dark potential – the temptation to make other people look bad so that we appear to be good in comparison. And it is out of that tendency that I believe shame is born.

Using Blame and Shame to Deflect

We see it in this story that we read this morning. When Adam and Eve are confronted with their failure to live up to the commandment that they were given, their immediate instinct is to try and blame and shame others. The man says, **“The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”** And then the woman says, **“The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”**

The whole point of having the knowledge that allows you to discern between good and evil is that you should take responsibility for the discernment that you make, but they fail to do that. By failing to take their own responsibility – by seeking to transfer it to others – they begin that process of tearing down others to build themselves up and it is from that process that shame gets its power.

This Story isn't about Sin

You know, I was always told that this story of the garden in the Book of Genesis was a story about how sin entered into the world. In fact, the Bible that we read from this morning still tells me that. The translators of this story in the New Revised Standard Version have given it the title, *“The First Sin and Its Punishment.”* There is just one problem with that. The word sin is not mentioned even once in this whole story. The concept of sin is only introduced later in the story of Cain and Abel. The whole idea that this story is about sin is actually something that later theologians came up with.

So let me ask this question, what if this story is not really about sin but rather about a much more insidious problem – the problem of shame. For this story makes it very clear that it was never God's intention that we be controlled by shame. It also strongly suggests that it was the alienation caused by their shame that made it impossible for the man and the woman to enjoy the peace and fellowship of the time of the evening breezes with their creator. Sin will come, but in this story, shame is the enemy.

Shame is the Enemy

And shame is still the enemy. For many of us, shame is that thing that prevents us from expressing who we were truly made to be and makes us feel bad about things that ultimately do not matter. And shame is still a tool that is used to keep people down and prevents them from standing up for what matters to them. But shame is not needed. We are beings, the Bible tells us, who were created to be unashamed when naked – not just physically but in every way.

So I leave you with a question. **“Who told you that you were naked?”** Who told you that you needed to be ashamed because maybe they were wrong? Maybe they didn't really have your best interest at heart. And maybe you ought to think before telling others they should be ashamed too.

