

Mother Eve
Genesis 2 and 3, Selected Verses
September 11, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
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P R A Y

This second Creation story that Dave just read is so familiar. We all heard it as children. People have used this story for centuries to justify their thinking about how men and women should relate to one another in the present.

For century upon century, theologians and preachers have taught that Eve was less than Adam, because she came second onto the earth, and because Eve tempted Adam to sin. And they have justified terrible subjugation of women because of what this first mother of us all supposedly did. All the ills of humankind have been laid at her feet. Worse, every failure of men today has been explicitly attributed to women because of her.

It is a little odd, this insistence on governing the relationships between women and men in 2022 based on this one Bible story, when the first Creation story, the one in Genesis 1, clearly states that both women and men are created in God's own image. Those of us who believe that all are created equally in God's image have a little trouble accepting the Eve and Adam story at all, so we tend to just ignore it, sweep it aside. And some feminists have even used their reading of this scripture to reject the Bible altogether.

That makes me sad, especially since the traditional interpretation of this Bible story is based on some key mistranslations of the original Hebrew text. So today, I just want to spend a few minutes liberating Eve – and liberating all of us.

I depend here on the translation and discussion of the text provided by Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, a formidable scholar of Hebrew language and Hebrew scriptures. But she is not the only scholar who has called out some of these mistranslations. What I am about to share with you is not simply a new interpretation of the scripture, a new way of thinking about the text, but rather, a very close reading of the original Hebrew text itself.

In the translation that Dave just read to us, we hear that God first created "man" from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. But what the text actually says is that God creates *ha'adam*, which means literally "earthling." This word does not suggest a gender, and in fact the ending of the word is a common indicator of plurality. God has made an earthling, potentially more than one earthling, from the earth of the garden. There is no man yet. There is no woman. There is only this earth creature.

So, if the first human creature was not Adam, where do Adam and Eve come from? That is another huge mistranslation that we have all received. Dave read that God puts the man Adam to sleep, and takes a rib from Adam and uses it to create Eve. Eve the derivative. Eve, less than. But actually, the *tzela* that God removes from the earthling is a "side," not a "rib." This word is used to mean "side" throughout the Old Testament. So, God literally splits the original earthling in half, and they become for the first time a man and a woman, still earthlings, but for the first time with gender. Individually and together, they are reflections of God.

Do you hear the difference in these two stories? In the story we all grew up with, the one we heard when Dave read it a moment ago, Adam, a singular man, is created and Eve, a woman, comes along later, almost an afterthought. But a close look at the original text reveals a different story. God first creates an earthling, not a man, not a woman, but potentially all of the above. And then, God splits the creature in two, and the first man and first woman emerge at the same time, equal partners with one another.

Then comes Eve's famous conversation with the serpent, which has been the very center of the centuries-long misinterpretation of Eve. We tend to think of snakes today as symbols of evil, but in ancient Near Eastern literature, they were symbols of immortality, wisdom, royalty, and power, and in this Biblical story, unlike any of the other animals God has created, this snake can speak.

God had commanded the earthling not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, saying that on that day the earthling would surely die. The serpent tempts Eve to eat the fruit anyway, by asking, "Did God REALLY say you could not eat the fruit of any tree here?" Eve responds, God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. You shall not even touch it, or you shall die."

Here Eve is interpreting God's commandments about the fruits that could and could not be eaten and about mortality. She is not quibbling. She is doing theology – thinking carefully and creatively about the nature of God and about our relationship to Godself.

The snake responds that God did not tell the whole truth. The earthlings can, in fact, eat the forbidden fruit and they will become like God, knowing good and evil. That is, God doesn't want them to eat the fruit because God is jealous of God's status as the all-knowing creator.

Eventually, Eve makes a choice. She chooses consciousness. The first time I heard a woman pastor describe Eve's choice this way, it took my breath away. Eve chooses consciousness. Eve is a seeker, a learner, a scientist of a sort. She wants to find out for herself, and so she does. Eve talks theology with a snake and then she chooses consciousness. She is an amazingly modern woman!

Then – and this is important – Eve offers some of the fruit to the man Adam, who has apparently just been standing right there beside her silently, passively throughout the whole conversation with the serpent. She doesn't have to go get him. She just offers the fruit to him, as it was offered to her, and he takes it, exactly as she took it.

Certainly, Eve is responsible for her own choices, but we shouldn't let theologians or preachers or anyone else blame Eve for what Adam does. He takes the fruit and eats it, too. Sure enough, after they eat it, they do understand things differently. They see themselves as physical, sexual creatures for the first time, and they hide from God because of it.

God comes back, of course, and asks Adam to account for himself. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the snake. And then come the consequences, and here again there are disturbing mistranslations. We have all read that God says, henceforth women will have pain in childbirth. But the original text speaks of the labor, not the pain, of giving birth. The man is assigned to labor, too, in a different way. And we have all read that God says that man will rule over woman because of Eve's great sin. But the text actually is something closer to "He shall rule with you." There is nothing at all here about women being subjugated to men.

And then, the most wonderful thing happens, and this is true in every translation. God kicks Eve and Adam out of the garden, but before they go, God sews them up some clothes from animal skins. Isn't that amazing? They have disobeyed the only restriction God gave them. They have become, in some ways, like a god themselves. They have broken God's heart. God promised to kill them if they did this. But instead, God sends them away to lead human lives, and hands them some new clothes as they are headed out the gate. I love that!

Now, I suppose you might ask, "Why should we even care about this story today?"

For me, the most important reason we should care about it is to unlearn the bad lessons we learned from it in the past. I don't know how most men today hear the story of Eve', but I know that lots and lots and lots of Christian women have internalized terrible negative messages about themselves as women that they received through this story, based purely on bad translation and bad theology. And

some men – even some Biblical writers – have been more than willing to use this story to hurt women. All those centuries of women being told to subjugate themselves to men, to stay in abusive marriages, to keep silent and let the men speak in church, all of that demeaning teaching which has hurt so many women and killed more than a few, is based on a mistranslation of the Bible. So, it is important that we all hear, and hear again, the truth: We are ALL created together in God's image, the text says. Women are fully capable of creative thought and conversation about God. Women are capable of making choices for themselves, and both women and men are responsible for the choices they make.

The second reason we should care about this story is because of what it teaches us about God. Like Eve, we can all be terribly misunderstood by the people around us. We can all be blamed for things we did not do. We can be slandered by those who should know better. Unearned criticism can even persist beyond our earthly lives. But God does not mistake who we are, any more than God mistook Eve. God knew exactly who she was, what she was capable of, what she did. God knew her humanness, her curiosity, her brokenness, her courage. God knew her through and through and loved her still and all.

God knows who WE are, too, no matter what others may say about us. God sees us clearly. God sees God's own image in all of us, and when we stray, God holds back from punishing us, calls us once again to our best selves, and makes sure we have what we need. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love! Thanks be to God!

Amen