

From the Pastor's Desk

Born a Sinner?

Once upon a time long ago, a group of Rabbis asked themselves: "How was the world created and why is there such suffering? Many of our women die during childbirth and our men scratch the parched earth under the heat of the sun to plant seeds and grow crops. We get sick and die. And sometimes our suffering comes at the hands of our fellow men. Certainly this wasn't the way Yahweh created things to be. Something must have gone wrong."

The Rabbis discussed this problem for many years and studied other cultures' understandings of creation, particularly the Enuma Elish which was written in the 12th century BC. This was the creation story of the Babylonians whose culture they were forced to endure while in captivity there from 597 to 538 BC. They found the Enuma Elish interesting, but were appalled at its polytheism and violence:

Marduk (the primary god) assembles his weapons and rides in his chariot of clouds to confront Tiamat (a rival god). After entangling her in a net, Marduk unleashes the wind to inflate Tiamat. He kills her with an arrow through her heart. After smashing Tiamat's head with a club, Marduk divided her corpse, using half to create the earth and the other half to create the sky. (From the Enuma Elish)

"This will not do", the Rabbis' thought. "There is only one God, Yahweh." And so they began the process of writing their own Jewish creation story, which we believe to be inspired by God. It's recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, which took final shape in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. In this story, we see no violent gods fighting with each other. Instead, we find Yahweh creating in a peaceful and orderly fashion:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth...God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. And God saw the light was good...God said, "Let there be water and the waters be gathered into one area and let the dry land appear"...Let the land produce vegetation"...And God said, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate day and night... Let the water and land team with living creatures"... And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image"... and so he created them male and female... And God saw all that he made and it was very good." (Genesis 1)

The Rabbis found this creation story to be much more acceptable. But, some of them found another creation tradition within Judaism that they wanted to include. This one described the creation of Adam from clay and Eve from one of Adam's ribs and placed them both in the Garden of Eden. And so they included this story in the second chapter of Genesis.

But the Rabbis were still perplexed. "This doesn't solve the problem of why there is so much suffering and violence in the world", they thought. They knew the Enuma Elish implied suffering and violence came from the gods, but the Rabbis would have none of that. Instead, they chose to locate the problem to be with humans and their rebellion

toward Yahweh, which lead them to develop the third chapter of Genesis, where we read what Christianity has come to call “Original Sin”, but that term cannot be found in the scriptures.

The cause of suffering and death, according to the Rabbis, is that Adam and Eve rebelled against God, symbolized by their listening to the serpent and eating the forbidden fruit. But this is a story about all of us. Picking fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is inevitable and even necessary as we grow and mature. Like the story of Adam and Eve, when we reach the age of reason, we too realize that we are naked and cover ourselves. We understand there is suffering and someday we will die. This realization is not original sin. It's part of the rite of transition from the innocence of youth to the harsh realities of adulthood, which is captured well in this poem.

On Turning Ten

By Billy Collins

*The whole idea of it makes me feel like I'm coming down with something,
something worse than any stomach ache or the headaches I get from reading in bad
light--a kind of measles of the spirit, a mumps of the psyche,
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.*

*You tell me it is too early to be looking back, but that is because you have forgotten the
perfect simplicity of being one and the beautiful complexity introduced by two. But I
can lie on my bed and remember every digit. At four I was an Arabian wizard. I could
make myself invisible by drinking a glass of milk a certain way. At seven I was a
soldier, at nine a prince.*

*But now I am mostly at the window watching the late afternoon light. Back then it never
fell so solemnly against the side of my tree house, and my bicycle never leaned
against the garage as it does today, all the dark blue speed drained out of it.*

*This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself, as I walk through the universe in my
sneakers. It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.*

*It seems only yesterday I used to believe there was nothing under my skin but light. If
you cut me I could shine. But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.*

So, this “original sin”, where we became aware of suffering and good and evil, was not born in us; it is part of the natural process of maturing. The belief that new-born babies are born sinners led to the unfortunate Roman Catholic teaching of limbo, i.e., a place located just outside the gates of heaven reserved for babies who were not baptized. Thankfully, this idea has been dropped. Its roots are traced back to the fifth century when Augustine taught that original sin was transmitted through the act of sexual intercourse between husbands and wives and all babies were infected, kind of like a disease that could only be healed by Baptism. This also led to an understanding of sexual intercourse as being dirty, or as Augustine seemed to think, a necessary evil in order for humans to be born. His teaching also provided some of the theological ground work for mandated celibacy within the Roman Church.

Judaism recognizes that a baby is born into a sinful world, but rejects the notion that the infant himself or herself has any sin. How can an innocent baby have sin when we read: *“After creation, God saw all he had made and it was very good”* (Genesis 1:31) and this included humanity? Yet, that is what many of us were taught. We were taught to view ourselves primarily as sinners rather than as creations made in the image of God, as seen in the first two chapters of Genesis. Can self-condemnation bring anything but problems to a human psyche?

On the other hand, it is obvious that there is something wrong with the way we humans treat one another, which is seen in gossip, racism, slander, crime, or most any other evil you can think of. Within the human heart there is the ego—that self-centered part of us that has a tendency to use others for personal gain. Left unchecked, the human ego is capable of tremendous evil. It is understandable that theologians of all denominations have often painted a dismal picture of human nature. Most all religions refer to the need to tame and subdue the ego.

Are we born with this propensity to sin and is Baptism the miraculous remedy? If so, we are stuck with limbo. Experience reveals that Baptism is not magic. The baby or adult is just as ornery after Baptism as before.

Instead, Baptism initiates us into where the real remedy is found—a daily dying to the garbage in our lives and rising in compassion and service to others. This is best done in the midst of a faith community where we are loved and nurtured and fed with bread and wine for the journey. Because a baby is too young to understand this, during the Baptism Service the parent or parents are asked to do everything they can to immerse their child in faith. In junior high school, when the student is Confirmed, (which is now called “Affirmation of Baptism”), they “Confirm” the faith of their parents, sponsors and the faith community in which they were Baptized as their own.

Here we are, now living East of Eden. We would like to return to the Garden where there was unity with God and wholeness. Jesus showed us the way but it leads through the cross. We will need to die to pride and rise to humility; die to greed and rise to generosity; die to hatred and rise to forgiveness; die to apathy and rise to compassion; die to spiritual blindness and rise to God dependency; die to selfishness and rise to giving ourselves away; and finally, die in this physical world and rise in eternity.

The Good News is that all of this is already complete in Christ. We, like the many blind people Jesus healed, need to have our eyes opened. We need to be awakened to the fact that in Christ, we are a new creation. Then, the Spirit of God cleanses us and through us continues the work of renewing all of creation.

Luther saw that sin had one main purpose—to make us surrender to Christ, which we see in the lyrics of his song, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”. Realizing this, we too surrender and with joy proclaim with Saint Paul, “I no longer live, Christ lives in me.”
Galatians 2:20 Resurrection begins today in our hearts.

~Henry