



Sermon

“Where Are You?”

Genesis 3:8-15

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During the past week I have been reading about the 1666 plague in the city of London. What a terrible time! England was at war with the Dutch at the same time, so there were enormous pressures from without and within. Fear drove people to pay enormous sums for protection from or cures for the plague. Misinformation and ignorance were rife; conspiracy theories abounded – the Dutch were out to get them, the Catholics were implicated, scapegoats needed to be found. The poor seemed to be the worst off.

They didn't know what the cause of it all was. They suspected God of punishing them for their sins and had no idea of how to deal with the infection.

Sound familiar? In this day and age, we may be further along in scientific knowledge, but as Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes says, there is nothing new under the sun.

In Genesis 3, we see the beginning of another kind of deadly infection that has been handed down from generation to generation ever since.

It is the spiritual infection of sin. Adam and Eve made the choice to trust the lies of Satan. They acted on Satan's advice rather than relying on their loving, generous, wise Creator and Friend. They let fear control their actions rather than trust in Yahweh. They traded complete harmony and happiness for dust and destruction because they were lured into dishonouring and disobeying God.

God has given us free will and he values it highly enough not to force us to choose His way, even if we will come to grief as a result. He gave Adam and Eve the choice to trust his voice or another voice and they not only disobeyed him but encouraged each other to sin. Adam was there watching as Eve took and ate – then when she did not keel over, he took a bite too. And such was the result of distrusting God and going the opposite way, that one of their first two sons murdered the other. How quickly it all escalated.

So that was how Satan gained access rights to the whole world. Sin and death entered our beautiful world. But God was not caught on the hop, he had already made a plan for this eventuality and carefully prepared a way for people to return to him. He made provision for the disfiguring stain of sin to be removed.

He had allowed options in the Garden of Eden. He didn't have to plant the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden. He didn't have to allow the possibility of sin to occur. But if he had not, we would not have what our society values extremely highly – choice. It shows that he values our free will extremely highly.

Later that day,⁸ ... *the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*⁹ *But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"*

¹⁰ *He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

They heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden. Imagine it. Maybe he was whistling. Maybe he was kicking up leaves as he walked.

"Where are you?" he called. But they were hiding. They were afraid. They knew they had done wrong. We all know that feeling, don't we?

Or was it, "Where **are** you?"

Reading scripture aloud is a very good practice. We speak it and hear it at the same time. Double value. Why? Well, it allows us to hear the tone of voice. We can tell a lot about our view of God, by the way we speak his word. We impose intonations on the text that spring from our own experience – the way we understand things. Our image of God shapes the way we speak and also how we hear Scripture.

An angry or impatient God will have an edge to his voice as he speaks to us. If when we are reading, we say to ourselves, "Yeah, yeah, I've seen that before, I'll skip that bit," it blocks God's voice.

He wants to speak to us, making the Scripture connect with us in our situation.

We can choose to read it with believing eyes and ask questions of the text. But first, we need to be confident in how God positively views us or the way we listen to Scripture will be skewed. Confidence in God is the foundation to all our praying and connecting with him. We can be rooted and grounded in peaceful trust in the midst of chaos, shame, uncertainty and failure, knowing that as St Paul said, nothing will ever separate us from the love of God.

He knows how many hairs are on our heads. He knows every word we are going to speak, even before they come out of our mouths. We are known. Known and loved.

Maybe when God asked, "Where are you?" it was not to receive information on their location, but so that Adam and Eve could hear his tone of voice.

And Adam took courage to say, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

At least he was honest. At least he stepped forward and spoke. But he was afraid and that was a new experience for him. We are so used to fear we could rush right past that word. We fear rejection, we fear being scorned, not being respected, we fear failure and being overlooked. Fear had entered and the rupture of their relationship was inevitable, especially since Adam and Eve had demonstrated that they trusted the serpent more than they trusted God.

"I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." "The woman you put in the garden, handed it to me..." Our excuses are about as useful as fig leaves are to cover nakedness.

One of the striking things about this passage is that God asks questions of the man and woman but not of the snake. "Where are you?"; "Who told you that you were naked?"; "What is this that you have done?"

We were made for relationship with God. God wanted to hear from their own lips what the situation was. Questions are very important in forming our relationships. If we assume we know what is going on or has gone on in someone, we miss the opportunity to understand things as they see them. God didn't jump down their throats, he asked questions. And he didn't enter into conversation with the snake, just cursed it.

How can we avoid making the same kinds of mistakes as Adam and Eve? Scripture is written so we can learn from other people's mistakes. How can we avoid being left with nothing but fig leaves to cover us and egg on our faces?

First, realise that God is not surprised or on the back foot regarding our situation. It helps to know that we are always welcome in the throne room.

Hebrews 4:16

[Because Jesus is the intermediary between us and God] Let us therefore approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Second, let's look carefully at the attitude of God expressed by Jesus. We read in Matthew 9:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

He is for us. So we've no longer any need to be harassed and helpless, tossed to and fro by conspiracy theories, vaccination scares and the like. Jesus has made the way for us to be in relationship with our loving, good, faithful God who is competent to make us hear his instructions. We don't even have to rely on our own ability to hear him!

Did you notice how easy it still was for Adam to hear God after he sinned? Sin can distract and make it harder, but we can still hear him. This is important, because we need to be able to discern the voice of the tempter from the voice of God. "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Well, Eve, you needed to be clear about whom you listened to. It had long-term consequences.

According to St Ignatius, if we are determined to follow God's way, the enemy will choose opportunities to bombard us with temptation. But God will invite us closer, speak gently to us in a still small voice. The enemy of our souls will urge and prod us to follow his leading, but it will not bring peace.

If we are determined to avoid God's way with its clear boundaries, the enemy's voice will be smooth and seductive as we turn towards him. God will keep reminding us, "Watch out! There's a trap here! Follow me!"

We are called by the Holy Spirit to choose against our legacy from Adam, the legacy of entitlement, distrust and anxiety. Let's choose to reaffirm our confidence in God's faithfulness, and follow his lead, individually and in community.

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