

Curses: based on Gen 3
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Coincidentally, the (long!) Genesis 3 passage that our lay reader just read came up in our church history class on Thursday. Usually, there are a couple of men in that class, but last Thursday we were all women, which might have affected the degree of outrage in the group. There was a pretty good consensus that Genesis 3 is disturbing and puzzling and possibly just downright harmful. The blame on Eve! The curses on Eve! She's going to desire the man but he's going to rule over her. She's going to have children, but it's going to hurt *a lot*. Sure, the man is cursed as well, doomed to eat bread in the sweat of his brow. But in the end, it isn't what you might call fair. Then again, I think we knew the setup of human society wasn't real fair. One thing this passage does it to bring that unfairness to light.

Neither women's subjugation to men, nor how hard human beings have to work, nor labor pains, it seems, were God's original intentions. Something went wrong along the way. And incidentally, if anyone is inclined to argue from this passage that women should always be ruled by men, I would like to see them also argue that men must always work very hard, so anything that makes work easier is unnatural and wrong. So talk to me when you're ready to give up not just your car, but the wheel, among other labor-saving inventions.

Ahmet recently introduced me to the book *Sapiens*, by Yuval Harrari, which is itself a sort of history of what went wrong with human civilization. What went wrong turns out to have *been* human civilization. Agriculture, which we were all taught was the beginning of culture and civilization and something to be celebrated, according to Harrari was a huge mistake. It meant bigger, more stable human communities, specialization of labor, and it pushed technology forward, but it also meant much more work for everyone, constant risk of famine and epidemic, and an upward spiral of want and need that the author calls the luxury trap.

Sapiens is a pretty depressing book, actually.¹ What went wrong went wrong very early and as far as I could read, which since it was so depressing was not that far, what went wrong is pretty much irreversible.

In Genesis, what went wrong was that human beings disobeyed God. We wanted more—more knowledge, more to eat. Not that different from the story that Harrari tells. In Genesis, though, all the hardship of the human condition comes from punishments, or consequences, meted out by God; so essentially the hard parts of being human are a curse.

That in itself rankles. We're cursed. Talk about depressing—it sounds like we're doomed. When Jesus wishes woes on the rich and comfortable, also a kind of cursing them, it seems as though he is telling their terrible fortune. It sounds to us like he's not so much urging them to change their ways as describing their impending punishment. For your sins, you will be hungry, you will weep. We have to remind ourselves, there is a choice in here somewhere. We don't have to stay rich and insulated, fat and happy, and cursed.

After all, if the curses in Gen 3 were meant to be permanent, shouldn't scripture just stop right here? We get to Genesis 3, get kicked out of paradise, the end. You're on your own human beings, good luck.

Conversely, if Eve hadn't had her conversation with the snake, what else would there have been to say? The happy ending would have come right at the beginning, so no real story. People and the animals and creation existed, forever—no death, no struggle, no pain, and no one knew much of anything, the end.

Scripture *doesn't* end there, of course—either happy in human ignorance or despairing of their ability to handle knowledge. Even as God is kicking the human beings out of the garden, he's making them clothes to wear, apparently by hand. God's care extends beyond the place where human beings lived in harmony with creation, beyond the place where they think for themselves and make stupid mistakes. God seems still to be hoping for the people to figure all this out, still dreaming that a happy ending can be found,

¹ Two different people who heard this sermon said they didn't find the book depressing at all, so maybe it's just me!

even now, after all the millennia of human struggle and arrogance and mistakes.

One thing we can see in this very rich story, one thing among so many others is this: Evil isn't an individual thing. It takes more than just the bad idea popping into one person's brain. It takes conversation and permission. The snake tells Eve, "Go ahead, do it." And she says, "you know, I think I will." God told her not to and she didn't; the snake told her to, and she did. Apparently she'll listen to anyone! And Adam's the same way. In fact, unlike Eve, Adam doesn't even think twice about it when he's offered the fruit, although he's been standing there listening to this whole weird conversation with the snake. *And she gave some to her husband and he said, "Oh thanks, I'm starving."* These people are not differentiating between the authority of God and the authority of God's creatures. And they're not differentiating between the Truth and what's only sort of true.

Even truly unbalanced people, people consumed by fear of other races, fear of the stranger, people who are drawn to violence and bloodshed—even people who are deeply disturbed still look for permission. The person who just shot 13 people in Buffalo was encouraged, inspired, permitted to do so by the writings and actions of previous shooters—the people who killed churchgoers in Charlottesville, worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Muslims at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.

We need to notice a few things in this horrible news. First, note the interfaith nature of this series of killings—Muslims, Christians, Jews, each targeted in turn, each seen by some man as invader and other and target. Second, note the clear connection between that fear of the immigrant, fear of the person of another faith or of another race—note the connection between that fear and the killing. The fear of our neighbors is itself a lethal weapon, it is a loaded gun lying around the house.

But note most importantly that extremists need permission to do the wrong thing. They need to be fed the kind of half-truths that the snake feeds the human beings.

Because in this story, the snake generally tells the truth. It's just a narrow kind of truth. He tells the human beings that they won't die, but forgets to add that they will be utterly alienated from themselves and God. He tells them they'll know good and evil, but doesn't say that now there will be

plenty of both to know. The truth that the snake chooses to tell is limited and it's those limits that deceive us.

Adam and Eve are gullible; that's actually their biggest problem. They listen to what came last, and they listen to what they want to hear. What do we learn from these poor dupes? Maybe that acting in wrongheaded self-interest is easy, and living in harmony with creation is hard. It means putting aside the partial truths that meet our needs and serve our interests, and waiting on the fullness of God's truth. And maybe we also learn that the way things are is not the way that God intended them to be. Not yet.