

**EAST OF EDEN**  
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Second Sunday in Lent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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*East of Eden, the practice of lament, is a regular and necessary response of faith, because east of Eden life is not perfect. Samuel Balentine*

**John 3:1-17**

"For God so loved the world that he gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved."

**Genesis 12**

Now the LORD said to Abram and Sara, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing to all."

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A year or so ago a woman came to see me. She was visiting a member of our parish who suggested she talk to me. And so we met in my office.

She told me of her chronic anxieties rooted in certain childhood traumas. She told me of sleepless nights, terrifying dreams, fatigue and missing time at work.

After a good while of listening I told her I thought her problems should be addressed by a psychiatrist and perhaps medication. To which she said: I am seeing a psychiatrist and taking medication.

Well, then, I said, why did you want to talk with me?

I came to see you, she said, because I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'm going to hell.

Well, that is truly a fear of a different order. So I asked her why she thought she was going to hell.

Because my pastor told me so. He came to my house 20 years ago and told me I was going to hell when I died. And I can't get it out of my mind.

It was hard to believe a pastor would say such a thing but I did ask her why he had said that.

He said I was going to hell because I had had a baby with a man outside my tribe.

I must admit I didn't see any trace of so-called tribal features in her face. But I asked anyway: *And to what tribe do you belong?*

I'm white, she said. And the father of my child is a man of color and my pastor said that violated God's law. It's in the Bible. You know, the Tower of Babel.

Indeed that story is in the Bible. Genesis 11. Which just so happens to precede the Old Testament lesson (Gen. 12) for today.

So listen to this and see if you hear a taboo on inter-racial co-mingling.

Once upon a time the whole earth had one language and the same words.

*By the way, like the story of Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit and the talking snake, this too is mythic, which doesn't mean it's untrue; mythic tales often convey deep truth and wisdom that facts alone cannot.*

Once upon a time the whole earth had one language. And as people migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar. They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'

And so they built a city.

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people. They have one language. This is only the beginning of what they will do. Nothing they propose to do will now be impossible. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech.'

So the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city.

Someone took that mythic folk tale of tribal and language diversity and turned it into an instrument of condemnation. Go figure.

I don't see that there. Rather, I hear this story as a lament, a perennial cry from the children of Adam and Eve who wander east of Eden, beyond that so-called garden paradise into a future fraught with anxieties, fear, guilt, shame, injustice, and violence.

We wander east of Eden, no turning back to the life of ease and innocence. For as the story goes, as the newly enlightened Adam and Eve departed the garden paradise, God posted two angels east of the garden to block the way back as if to say, your life is now before you, beyond this garden.

It's true; we have arisen out of the animal world with creative powers like the gods. No turning back. So now we *must* shape our own destiny. Or, is it, we *can* shape our own destiny? Or, we *shall*? Or, we *may*?

Eve bore two sons. Cain and Abel. Cain thought he had been treated unjustly. He was full of anger and hatred. And God said to Cain, 'Sin is lurking at your door—*lurking like a wild beast, the way hatred, greed and envy lurk near our own hearts*—its desire is for you, but you *must* master it.'

In John Steinbeck's novel, *East of Eden*, Lee, the Cantonese cook, is so enthralled by the story of Cain and Abel he devotes his life to learning Hebrew in order to understand the original word behind "must." The Hebrew is *timshel*, which can be translated, you *must*. But other translations put it as, you *shall* or you *can*.

What Lee discovered was that *timshel* can also be translated *you may*. 'Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you *may* master it.' In other words, we have choices within certain limitations.

Our destiny is not predetermined. We have a hand in our own evolution. It's the blessing and curse that comes with being human, with higher consciousness, of reaching beyond ourselves.

Cain made a choice. He hid in the field, rose up and killed his brother Abel in cold blood. And ever since the brothers and sisters of the human family have been killing each other in one way or another.

How will the children of humankind ever learn to live peaceably together?

According to our Great Ancestors, not easily.

Still there is in our hearts a longing for peace that won't quit. We aspire to build a beloved community where all of us may be safe and secure—the way the world unites to find one missing plane or the way it united in sympathy after 9/11. But that dream, that quest forever eludes and frustrates us, as the Tower of Babel tale suggests.

According to our tradition, the brokenness of the human family is not the end of the story. It's the beginning of a story. It's the beginning of a story unfolding and evolving into the Christ, the icon of humanity, the Beloved in whom all may be one.

These pre-historic, mythic tales found in Genesis 1 through 11 are the literary prologue to the story of Abraham and Sarah who sensed a tugging at the hearts, a calling, a kind of promise in their hearts that a way could be found to overcome tribal hatreds and divisions. It was the beginning of a long journey toward the city of God.

And so I said to the distraught woman sitting in my office that afternoon: You are not going to Hell. Even if there were a Hell, its gates could not prevail against the love of God. Because God so loved the world, and that includes you, that God gave the only son so that you would not perish but rather have eternal life.

God did not send Jesus through eons of evolution to condemn the world but rather to save it, that is, to heal it and make it whole, to save us from hell on earth, including your anxieties.

And then I told her what you have often heard here on many a Sunday: *There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. And there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. God loves you just as you are. But loves you way too much to leave you just as you are.*

A smile broke over that woman's face and she said, thank you. I never heard that before.

One of the saddest lines in the entire Bible comes from the story of the "Tower of Babel." It is this: *and they left off building the city.*

And then something happened.

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SONG: "City of God"