

## Jesus in Genesis: The Seed of the Woman

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

December 3, 2023

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Genesis 3:12-20

Welcome to Advent, the only season of the year when we observe the longing for what is yet to come, Jesus' return, promised and assured because of what God has done in the past. During this season we will look into the Old Testament book of Genesis for hints of God's plan in Jesus. And we start today at the beginning of Genesis, Genesis 3, especially focusing on these few words in Genesis 3:15: I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel

Thinking about that verse this week through the frame of Advent reminded me of the first time I realized the Virgin Mary was once a girl like me. I think I was ten or eleven. I learned that Mary was probably not too much older than I was when Gabriel made his startling announcement. "Do not be afraid, Mary...you will be with child and will give birth to a son, and you will call his name Jesus...."

Imagining Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a teenager stopped me in my tracks. That's when I experienced my first pang of anxiety about ever becoming a mother. I knew the words God spoke to the woman of Genesis 3:16. "I will greatly increase your pain in childbearing; in pain you will give birth to children."

Some of us deal with much more than just the first pang of anxiety about childbearing this morning. Perhaps pain in childbearing is the most acute when it's completely absent. The fact that Advent is about waiting in the dark for the Light of the World coming as a baby is visceral for us. Maybe you're going through infertility treatments or reeling from an adoption that fell through. Or you're longing for children you would like to have but won't, or children you have known and buried. Or you're anguished over grandchildren whose needs you name all the time to God. All of you know the pain of childbearing East of Eden.

How had Mary been so open to God's plan? She, too, must have had some fear of the vulnerability, pain, and alienation it would cost her. She also knew and trusted the God who called her. And her "yes" to Gabriel allowed her to participate in the birth pangs of a cosmic work of God.

As we focus on these few verses from Genesis 3, we have a layered horizon in view. In the near horizon is the way the Israelite audience may have heard this story through the years. In the far horizon is the view of Christians of the New Testament and beyond, looking back on this passage through the life and ministry of Jesus.

Before the serpent approaches the woman and her husband who is with her; before they believe the lie that God is holding out on them, the two of them live in a Garden made to meet their every need. Genesis 1:28-30 gives us a picture of God's blessing. Fruitful lives, meaningful work, plentiful food. Seed-bearing plants as far as the eye can see. The untarnished expectation of children and family, without fear of childlessness or pregnancy complications. Wise stewardship of God's good creation. No competition for food and no survival angst. Direct access to the presence of God and a good home where every physical, relational, and spiritual need is met. In a world full of the consequences of sin, both around us and within us, this is life with a God beyond all praising in a world beyond imagining.

That's before. But then in Genesis 3 we begin to get the picture of life after: After the woman and the man listen to an adversary they don't recognize, after they bite into the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, after their willingness to trust and obey God goes awry. And so there they hide, naked and afraid in the garden, listening for God's approach and preparing their defense.

God the Judge comes to question the two defendants, the man and the woman. The first sentence he pronounces is not on them but on the serpent who started the whole sordid tale to begin with: "Because you have done this [deceiving the woman], (3:14-15) "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

As the woman stands trembling in her fig leaves, God turns to her. "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your

husband, and he will rule over you.” Where there once was only delight in bearing children, now there is pain and angst. Where there once was ease and joy in marriage, now there are power struggles. Enmity has entered the world.

On the near horizon, the family survival of the “offspring of the woman” whose stories are told in Genesis is under threat. Adam and Eve’s son Cain starts the descent into violence and murders his brother Abel. By the days of Noah, an invasive stain called “evil” leaches into God’s good world, invading the thoughts of human hearts so that they’re “only evil all the time.” Sarai, Rebekah, and Rachel face infertility; Jacob and his family are threatened by famine.

And on the slightly further horizon, enmity in the world is what God’s people generations later encounter. They work as enslaved people in Egypt. They wander through the desert as refugees. They live in the Promised Land under good kings and bad kings and then finally are exiled in Babylon.

It would be reasonable for those subsequent generations to ask: “Why are things so hard?” Why do our children die and why do we eat our bread in anxiety? And the narrator of Genesis would say because there is enmity, an ongoing struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. As sons and daughters of Eve, we exchange “heel strikes and head strikes” with a power opposed to the goodness of God. Christian tradition has held that evil is the privation or absence of good. Our enemy can’t construct anything truly enduring or real, but nevertheless has power to suck the goodness out of everything.

In her book of sermons and essays about Advent, Fleming Rutledge writes, “I think most of us realize that in our time we have crossed some sort of boundary into new territory. The sunnysiders have been dragged willy-nilly out of their safe places. We are beginning to see more clearly now that no office, school or church is truly safe; that the internet has greatly increased our capacity to share lethal information, that there is something ugly lurking in human nature.

Advent summons us to take a fearless inventory of our own hearts. No one is free from the power of sin and death. No one has power in himself to help himself. No one can say to herself, “Well, I’m not a murderer so I’m not so bad...”

Rutledge goes on to quote Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp, who says “[T]he human species...[has] the potential to construct an infinite enormity of pain, and that pain is the only force created from nothing, without cost and without effort. [To cause this infinite pain, neglect or negation is enough] it is enough not to see, not to listen, not to act.”

As Christians, we take sober analysis of our own hearts. We resist evil and act for what is good in the manner of Jesus as far as God gives it to us to see the good. Because, in the far distant horizon of Genesis 3:15, there is a promise of the triumph of an eternal God who is great and good, and we want to participate in that kind of kingdom. We are the people who see with the eyes of grounded hope that there will not be this relentless struggle for all time. For in the seed of the woman, from Eve all the way down to Mary, comes Christ, the son of God.

Through this farther-horizon view of the New Testament and beyond, the final outcome of the struggle between the woman’s offspring and the serpent is assured by the coming of Jesus. The early church and later audiences heard in this Genesis 3:15 the first whisper of the gospel, it came to be called the protoevangelium. Already at the outset of human rejection of God, the interpreters recognized, God had a plan to restore the full blessing of his presence and his goodness to his people at great cost to himself. Satan, sin, and death would indeed issue a deadly heel strike to the Son of God, born of a woman. But the Son himself would crush the power of Satan, sin, and death, putting all his enemies under his feet.

Back in the garden, where God could have answered human disobedience with a curse in the same way he cursed the serpent, it’s noteworthy that God’s sentence of judgment on the woman isn’t a curse. The blessing is not totally lost. No. In the near horizon view, childbearing is still and all good, it is still a blessing, though now it will be harder. And it is still a gift whose goodness is not overcome by the real angst surrounding it ever since Eden.

And in the farther horizon, beyond the immediate reference to the birth of children, there is a promise for the woman to participate in fighting against Satan, sin, and death. Through her sin entered the world. Yet God doesn’t write her out of his planned redemption. God grants Eve the dignity of participating in his redemptive work, painful as it may be, to carry the promise of the child yet to come forward into the world.

In 2005, a contemplative Cistercian nun in Iowa named Sister Grace Remington was preparing for a talk she was going to give about Mary. As she thought about her teaching, she picked up her crayons and pencils and began to draw a portrait now called *Mary Consoles Eve*. The artwork is on a bright yellow background with an archway of fruit in the foreground. In the center are the two women, Eve shrouded in long hair, the serpent coiled around her foot. And Mary, advanced in her pregnancy, is wearing white and blue. Eve holds the forbidden fruit and looks down. Mary holds Eve's other hand on her own abdomen, where Christ is.

Sister Grace doesn't consider herself an especially talented artist, though her work had a surprising reach after it was made into a Christmas card and shared online. But she is glad it has spoken of Christ to people. She says, "I hope the picture communicates the way Christ is present in our encounters even when we cannot see Him. The picture is of Mary and Eve, but Jesus is there too. He is, in fact, at the very center. If it was just a picture of an un-pregnant Mary with Eve, it might be lovely, but the presence of Jesus in that picture is what gives it real meaning. I always think of this during Advent: even before his birth, Christ was already among us within Mary. So many Advent texts talk about "awaiting the coming of the Savior", but he was there for nine months before that Christmas night. And now, too, we live in the "now but not yet" of the coming of God's kingdom."

The promise has carried forward through all the generations. We ourselves are spiritual descendants, physically born of human mothers but born again through the Spirit; like the first disciples, like the women at the empty tomb, we too bear the mystery of Christ not through a family tree but through the indwelling Christ in us. Bearing Christ in the world is our hope of glory. Just as surely as Jesus came so surely he will return and put everything under his feet. And so we wait with hope for all hostilities, sins, and fears to be bound up in his good and gracious reign. Come, Lord Jesus.

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