

“From the Garden: Beginning Again”
Sermon from Genesis 2:25-3:13; 3:21-24
Given Sunday, June 6, 2021
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Now the woman and the man were both naked, though they were not ashamed. But the snake was even more naked: the most cunning of the animals that God had made. The snake asked the woman, “Did God really tell you not to eat from the trees in the garden?” The woman answered the snake, “We may eat fruit from all the other trees in the garden. But of the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘Don’t eat it and don’t touch it, or you will die.’” The snake said to the woman, “Die? You won’t die! God knows well that on the day you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil!”

The woman knew that the tree was enticing to the eye, and now saw that the fruit was good to eat – that it was desirable for the knowledge it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to the man beside her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

When they heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, the man and the woman hid from God’s presence in the trees of the garden. God called to the man: “Where are you?”

“I heard you walking in the garden,” replied the man. “I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid.”

“Who told you of nakedness? Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I forbade you to eat?”

The man replied, “It was the woman you put beside me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it.”

Then God asked the woman, “What is this that you have done?”

The woman replied, “The snake tempted me, so I ate.”

...God made clothes of animal skins for the woman and the man to wear. Then God said, “Look – these humans have become like one of us, knowing both good and evil. They must not be allowed to take in their hands the fruit from the Tree of Life as well, or they will eat of it, and live forever.” So God drove them from the garden of Eden, and sent them to till the soil from which they had been taken. Once they were banished, winged sphinxes with fiery, ever-turning swords were placed at the entrance to the garden of Eden to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

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A friend of mine lives in Minneapolis, rides his bike everywhere, even in the winter, and for the past year, he’s pedaled frequently to the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue. He comes alone or with others, to pray or sing or distribute water, at this crossing that has become known as George Floyd Square, in memory of the man who was killed there a year ago.

It's been a place of mourning, of course - people of all ages, from all places, come to weep and to remember. Many have brought messages and artwork and flowers to lay at the site. Jeanelle Austin, a local activist, calls them offerings, because she says that's the spirit they were given in, and because this space has become a sacred site. She's gone to the square every day for ten months, to gather up things that have been left, so that there's room for more to be brought, so that it all might be preserved. She told a CNN reporter, "We are keepers of the stories of the thousands of people who have come through here to actually lay down their offering as a creative expression of pain and hope."

The square also been a place of joy, a place where people gather to say they will claim and celebrate their own lives, like the grown black women playing jump rope, double dutch, giggling when they stumble, inviting strangers to join in; or like the community gardeners who have put down dirt, claimed space so that something might always be alive there.

It's a hospitable space. Last winter, activists dotted the intersection with small fire pits to keep mourners warm. A preservation team shoveled the snow. The space has welcomed houseless people who were kicked out from their encampments in other spots around the city.

It's also a place that has seen more violence, since Floyd's killing. And it's a place that community members have stepped up to

secure, taking turns acting as guardians of the square, as cleaning crew, as their own medic unit.

Last May, soon after Floyd's killing, the city of Minneapolis erected concrete barriers to protect mourners from traffic. Local activists reinforced those barriers with traffic cones on the outside and a metal barricade, like a bike rack, around the inside.

A massive sculpture of a fist rises to the sky from the center of the space. Some days it holds a Pan-African flag. Some days it is draped in giant tissue-paper flowers. It is the visual and metaphorical center of the memorial.

And this past Thursday, it was encircled by stop signs.

This past Thursday, at 4:30 in the morning - when they knew they'd find it quiet - city officials in Minneapolis came to clear the square. They removed the barriers, so that traffic might flow again through that intersection. It had been more than a year.

There are competing narratives about whether local activists were informed that this would happen. The city says they were working with neighborhood leaders; they were hearing from residents and businesses that they felt trapped in their own homes, that their stores were starving. That their space didn't belong to them anymore. And it didn't.

But activists say it doesn't belong to the city, either.

As soon as my friend heard what was happening, he rode up there. He said he found a small but growing crowd with the city's machines haul away what had been built. Gathered were lots of press, some clergy, some people seeking political office. Free popsicles and donuts being passed around. Plenty of passion. He heard someone say, "by noon, we'll have back every piece they took away."

But can you get that kind of thing back?

Thinking back over the year, watching that space evolve, witnessing the folks who come and being among them, my friend said, "I don't think some city leaders understand what George Floyd Square provides: I've watched people with vengeance in their eyes melt because they had a space to lament, scream, cry, and grieve." He said, "The city placed stop signs around the fist, at every angle, but I don't think they see the irony. 'Stopping' was the entire point of George Floyd Square: to stop all ways, in all directions, to stop 'business as usual.'"

No one is under any illusion that the removal of the city's barriers means things will return to "normal," if that's how we think of movement at that intersection before the police officer knelt on Floyd's neck until he breathed his last. City spokespeople say they will work with community members to create a lasting memorial that honors Floyd's life and serves as a space for the community to grieve and heal.

But activists brought a list to the city, a list of demands to promote racial justice and protect citizens, things to be done before the removal of the barricades, and none of those have been done. And in the absence of that, Jaylani Hussein says the city's actions are attempts to erase the community's pain. He said, "They're not trying to drive cars through here. They are trying to delete history. And we will not let them delete history. We will not give up this space."

What does it mean to give up a space, or to take it back? What does it mean to be barricaded from a space, or to be welcomed there?

When God drives out Adam and Eve from the garden - the same verb that describes how the Spirit got Jesus into the desert for his time of reflection and temptation, before his public ministry began - it's a strict removal. If they turn back to where they came from, they see forbiddance: winged sphinxes with fiery, ever-turning swords. At least, that's how our ancestors told the story, maybe to convey something like: "you can't go home again."

But with Eve, with Adam, that barrier isn't because of curse. It's because of change. Womanist theologian Wilda Gafney writes calls what God does here the "reconfiguring of creation." God has some idea of how the story will go. It doesn't: people think for themselves, act for themselves, listen to the other God-made creatures and want to know, like God knows, themselves. In

response, God reconfigures creation. God says, "Well, that's not gonna work anymore - I made these folks like me, and, turns out, they are!" They grow and they change; they become curious and they become aware and they become other than what they have been. And so God continues to refigure creation.

The people have to leave where they have been. Because of what's happened there, it is not the place it once was. Because of what's happened there, they are not who they once were. But they are still God's. Everywhere they go is still God's. In all life you're living, we sang to begin this service. In all life you're living, the true life of all. In Adam, and in Eve, and in that clever snake - a creature that appears all over ancient Near Eastern literature as a symbol of the divine. In all life you're living - in the lush garden where they began, where things were easy and abundant; and in the land just outside of it, where they come to, where they have to work - a land that will still nourish and nurture them.

The people leave the garden and they can never leave the garden. Now they have to till the ground from which they came. That's not just gardening, farming, right? Till the ground from which you came? That's digging deep into the stuff that makes us who we are, and spending time in it, pushing it and prodding it, asking for growth from it and letting it rest when it needs to. That's laying down dirt in the middle of an intersection that has seen death and insisting that life will come again. We are our own work. We are each other's work. The world and our connection to it is our work.

One of the community activists at George Floyd Square, who has collected sculptures and plywood planks and giant bouquets of flowers says it's not just the big stuff that's being preserved. Every memory, every offering, has been collected. He said, "Even the smallest post-it note has been saved."

In all life you're living, in both great and small.

The world we are emerging into is different than the one from which we came. We are continually being reconfigured. Old worlds sometimes close themselves off to us, changed by the time, the energy, the love we spent there. And so we step into the new, but we carry with us what helps us remember, what helps us pay homage, to who and where we have been.

I don't know what fears or hesitations you face these days, with our collective reemergence already underway. I don't know what joy or excitement is brewing inside you, whether all of those emotions swirling inside might some days be too much. Sometimes, at least for me, it feels like a lot.

But here's what I know: Whatever else has changed, this remains - we are from God and for God, from each other and for each other. Where we're going now, where we're going next, we go together. Thanks be to God.