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January 3rd: Genesis 3 & John 2

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Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 3. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden? And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked and I hid myself.

He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate. Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent deceived me, and I ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock, and above all beasts of the field.

On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

To the woman he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing. In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.

And to Adam he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it. Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.

Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever.

Therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. Chapter 3 of Genesis begins by introducing us to the character of the serpent.

The serpent, we are told, is shrewd. There's a pun here upon the word for naked that has just been used of the man and the woman. And some translators have tried to capture this with plays such as The man and the woman were nude, and the serpent was shrewd.

Samuel Bray and John Hobbins in their recent translation described the serpent as

smooth and shrewd, suggesting nakedness with that word smooth. And the serpent seems to be associated with the beasts of the field in some way. He has a cunning, an ability to navigate the world that humanity can learn from.

Now if we think about the animals, one of the things that the animals do for us is teach us how to negotiate new environments. We follow their tracks. We go to the watering holes that they lead us to.

And the serpent is in many ways a creature that seems to be fitted to teach Adam and Eve concerning the wider world. And he questions the woman. The woman in many ways is the weakest point of the situation in the garden.

Why is that the case? Well she hasn't received the commandment concerning the tree directly from God. And so she's relying upon knowledge received second hand from Adam. And if you pay attention to what the serpent says to her, he's playing off two pieces of information against each other.

In chapter 1 verse 29, the man and the woman are told that all the fruit of the trees has been given to them. And then in chapter 2 verses 16 and 17, the man alone is told about this one restriction. And so the serpent plays off that first piece of information that she has received first hand against the second piece of information which she has not.

And when God challenges them later about the commandment, he challenges Adam in particular. If you read the text carefully, you should notice if you read it in the original Hebrew or if you read it in the King James Bible, that it's a singular pronoun that's used. It's Adam in particular that is challenged.

Adam was the one commanded and it was a commandment delivered chiefly to him. Now the woman also enjoys privileged access to the heart of the man. So if you want to get to the man, it's very good to go through the woman because she can break through his defences in a way that the serpent could not directly.

Note the serpent's promise. You will be like God or like the gods, knowing good and evil. I think it might be better to take this as a reference to the gods.

And the serpent himself is presumably one of these. It maybe makes more sense of what's taking place. That God is surrounded by the gods.

Now the gods are not the pagan deities as we understand them within the ancient Near East. They're the angels. They're the rulers of the world that God has established and created.

They're created beings. They're a court that fits within a monotheistic framework that's very different from the polytheism of the nations round about. But scripture talks about the gods on many occasions in the Old Testament.

And here I think might be one of them. The serpent's promise is that they will be like one of the ruling creatures, one of the angelic beings, one of these beings that rule within the world. If only they eat of this fruit.

And later on it seems that they do in fact become like one of the gods, knowing good and evil. And it would seem to me that it makes more sense to refer that to the gods rather than God himself. The serpent makes an insinuation that the woman never effectively challenges.

Now note what he says. He suggests that God has withheld all the trees of the garden. But he didn't do that.

He didn't say that they couldn't eat of any of the trees. There was just one tree that was forbidden to them. And the insinuation there is that God is not a good giver but that he is fundamentally withholding.

And the woman never effectively diffuses that. And that can so easily become our attitude. We can think of God as one who's holding back his good gifts from us as children.

But at the very heart of the story of creation is a story of God who is the good giver, who wants to give us good gifts. And those things which he has withheld from us are withheld for a good reason. And that is the insinuation that the serpent brings at this initial point.

There's also a confusion of what is good to our senses and what is morally good. The woman sees the fruit and it seems good for food, desirable to make one wise, etc. It's a delight to the eyes.

And yet that is not necessarily the same thing as being morally good. Something that is good in a moral sense is not necessarily the same thing as something that seems visually appealing or appealing to our tastes or whatever it is. And that distinction between those two things is a very great part of what it means to gain moral perception.

Infants often can't distinguish between what tastes good and what is actually good for their bodies. And that sort of distinction is the distinction that the woman and the man seem to act and lack in this passage. It should maybe reflect a bit upon the meaning of nakedness.

Nakedness can be associated with infancy. And infancy has two key things associated with it. Moral innocence, not sinful, and so in the same way as an adult is.

And there's less of a sense of interiority, so there's less of a sense of shame associated. And then there's less glory. Glory is something that is to do with our status, our honour, the way that we appear to others, the way that we have standing in the world and in the sight of others.

Now infants don't have that yet. And so they run around quite happily naked without having a strong sense of interiority or a sense of honour and glory that would give them any qualms about it. Whereas when we grow up, we can have a strong sense of, for instance, being underdressed.

We go to a party and everyone else is dressed up for the event and we're actually underdressed. We're maybe wearing jeans and some shirt that isn't particularly neat. And we feel that we stand out.

And so that sense of being underdressed is a sense of a lack of glory. And that nakedness that the man and the woman experience at this point suddenly hits them with a force is in part a sense of being underdressed and it's also a sense of exposure to judgement. It's exposure to the gaze of the other.

Now the naked human being is in many ways the peeled human being, the human being that has been robbed of their outer covering. Clothing is quite natural to us. Clothing is that which glorifies us.

When we become mature, we tend to dress up for special events, to show status, to show our importance, whatever it is. And these are not bad things. But then there's also that sense of shame when clothing is removed.

And that sense of shame is a sense of a lack of glory, a lack of integrity, whatever it is, and an exposure to the judgement of others. Now opened eyes, as Adam and Eve experience, are eyes of judgement, eyes that can see things in their interior character. The infant doesn't wear clothes in part because they have no strong sense of interiority.

And when two people become one flesh, they should be able to be naked and unashamed with each other. But yet our shame can be seen even in our most intimate acts and relations, a shame that is founded upon in part our loss of integrity and our loss of innocence, moral innocence. Even in these most intimate acts and relations, we can set up psychological barriers, barriers of technique, or something else to prevent ourselves from being truly exposed and vulnerable to the gaze of the other person.

We're shrinking away. We're trying to hide ourselves as Adam and the woman were. Later in scripture we can see that key human beings gain the knowledge of good and evil and become like the gods in certain respects.

These aren't necessarily bad things in themselves, and it seems that the knowledge of good and evil might have been given to Adam and Eve if only they waited. The problem is they're like kids joyriding in their parents' car, not waiting for the proper time when, when they come of age, they might be given the keys and taught how to drive themselves. Adam, note, shifts blame to the woman, but also to God.

He says, the woman whom you gave to be with me, she, etc. The man is suggesting not

merely that God is a god who is withholding, as the serpent insinuated earlier, but that God gives bad gifts. The woman is not a good gift.

She is a gift that has led him astray, that has caused all this upset, and God is ultimately the one responsible. Now, there are three judgments associated with the three participants, and there's a promise contained in the judgment to the serpent. The promise of the one that will crush the serpent's head, the seed of the woman, and here in embryo, we see the story of Scripture being presented.

We saw it to an extent in the previous chapter with the promise of a man leaving his father and mother and being joined to his wife, and the two becoming one flesh. That anticipates what happens in Christ and the Church. But here, we see the seed of the woman is anticipating the great form of redemption in Christ, how God will ultimately defeat and conquer the serpent, that he will destroy the works of the devil.

That is the purpose for which Christ came. Both the man and the woman are to be frustrated in their relationship with that from which they were taken. The woman's task focuses on the filling work of bringing life and forming the heart of human society, but she will find that her husband rules over her rather than acting to strengthen her.

Now, her desire will be for her husband. I don't think that's a statement that she wants to take his place. I think it's more a fact that she wants him.

She wants him to act on her behalf. She wants him to be on her side, and yet she finds that he frustrates her. He rules over her.

He does not use his strength to come to her aid and her support. Rather, he frustrates her and subjugates her in different ways. And on his part, the man's task focuses on the forming work of taming the earth, and he will be frustrated by it.

He will ultimately return to the dust, and he will become, as he returns to the dust, food for the serpent who eats the dust. And all this frustration can be seen as purely curse, but there's a form of grace here as well. It keeps sin on a tighter leash.

By putting enmity between the woman and the serpent, by putting a frustrating relationship between the man and the woman, and by frustrating man's labours in the world, sin is prevented from rushing forward inexorably to destroy the entirety of creation. It's kept on a tighter leash than it would have been otherwise. And there's a blessing here to know that sinful human beings cannot exert the full force that they might like in shaping the world to their sinful desires.

Likewise, the entrance of sin and death serves constantly to cut back sin, preventing it rising to its full, unfettered development. Death forces us to reckon with the end of our existence, not just the temporal end, but also our end in the sense of our final purpose. It forces us to consider ourselves before judgement.

And so God casts the man and the woman out of the garden. He places them within the wider world, and they must fend for themselves there in a new way. They must work no longer in the garden where they're provided for, where they have all this fruit to hand, but in a difficult working situation, where they no longer have the same access to God's presence.

Some questions to think about. First of all, why is the woman named Eve? What is the significance of that name? Second, can you observe some literary parallels and connections between the judgement on the woman and the judgement on the man? And what might be learned from these? And finally, what significance can be seen in God's making the man and the woman garments of skins? John chapter 2 Do whatever he tells you. And when the servants who had drawn the water knew, the master of the feast called a bridegroom and said to him, Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine.

But you have kept the good wine until now. This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and the money changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and the oxen.

And he poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, Take these things away, do not make my father's house a house of trade. His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me.

So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. It is always important to pay attention to the unique ways each of the gospel writers tell the stories that they share in common.

For instance, we've already seen that John the Baptist is not called John the Baptist

within the book of John. He's the witness. Something to notice in this chapter is that Mary is never referred to by name in Jesus' gospel.

She is always Jesus' mother, or addressed as woman. It would be surprising indeed if Mary's name were unknown to the readers of the gospel. Presumably they're quite aware of Mary's name.

And the beloved disciple who writes the gospel takes Mary into his own home. So the omission of her name seems to be significant on account of a symbolic role that she's playing. She stands for something more than just an individual.

The chapter begins with the third day. And I think we should, in addition to recognising this as the eighth day of the sequence of days that I've already noted, we should see it as perhaps a subtle hint of resurrection themes. The precise numbering of the days is something that invites reflection, and it's not entirely clear on the surface of the narrative.

But here I think the three days might be important. The theme of water and purification is also very important at the beginning of John's gospel. It occurs on several occasions.

It occurs within this chapter. It occurs within the previous chapter with the reference to John's baptism. Again, there's a reference to being born of water and the spirit in the chapter that follows.

There's the living water of chapter 4. There's the man by the sheep pool in chapter 5. And then there's the crossing of the Sea of Tiberias in chapter 6. In chapter 7, there's the out of him shall flow rivers of living water. All these references to water. And here we have a significant one.

The purification of the old covenant. This water of purification in these old water pots is transformed into something new, into wine. And this wine is the best wine.

It's the better wine. And now it's going to be used for a great feast. What was once just water for drinking and for cleansing now becomes a feast for celebrating.

A wedding. The master of the banquet would have been different from the host, the bridegroom and the best man. He would presumably have been chosen by lot from the host or maybe even by the guests themselves.

And the turning of the water into wine is also, as the first sign of Jesus, something that might draw our mind back to another initial sign. Which is the turning of the waters of the Nile into blood. In both cases, there's the turning of water into something else.

Red in both cases. But there's a contrast. Whereas the first was turned into blood, something that could not be drunk, this is turned into a more glorious form of drink.

A drink for celebration rather than judgement. Jesus has already been identified as the Lamb of God, presumably the Passover Lamb. And the scene has been set for a new exodus.

And now, instead of performing great acts of decreation, tearing down the creation, Jesus' signs herald a glorious new creation, a place of wine and feasting and celebration. And the setting as a wedding feast and the bringing of new wine and the statement of the master of the feast all suggest that the miracle is a sign of the character of Jesus' work more generally. This is where it all begins.

This is where we see Jesus entering into his ministry in the book of John. He is the bridegroom. He replaces the water of the old covenant with the wine of the new.

And in the wedding feast of God's kingdom, the best comes later. It's also worth noting the way that Jesus' word is given great importance within this chapter. This is a sign done in secret.

No one actually sees the water turn into wine. We don't know when exactly in the process it takes place. It's a sign done in secret.

And the power is that of Jesus' word and people obeying it. And the sign is confirmed by the master of the feast. And that conversation that occurs afterwards is a significant part of the sign.

It discloses aspects of its meaning. Moving on, while the synoptic gospels record temple cleansing in the last week of Jesus' ministry, John records a cleansing at the beginning. And there are two different ways of taking this.

We could argue that there are two separate cleansings that occur. And in that case, we might see maybe the pattern of the leprous house, which is tested once and cleansed. And then the second time it's tested and condemned.

Maybe this is placed here to suggest that there are two such events and bring to mind that leprous house cleansing. Another possibility is that it's moved forward in time. And so it's not a direct chronological series of events, but rather a significant theological framing of the account.

John, unlike the other gospels, focuses far more upon Jerusalem and the feasts at Jerusalem. He doesn't give so much attention to the Galilean ministry as you'll find within the other gospels. By placing the temple cleansing at this point, he would situate the entire narrative following under the first sign, following the shadow of the Passion Week.

It's the event that leads in the other gospels to the plot to kill Jesus. And so by placing it at the very outset here, he's presenting all of Jesus' ministry under that threat. While the other gospels climax in Jerusalem, John is centred upon Jerusalem throughout.

It might also help to introduce this movement through the temple that we'll see in these chapters. John presents Christ as the Ark in chapter 1, upon which God's presence rests. He's the lamp of the world, the light of the world.

He's the altar from which things ascend and descend between heaven and earth. In John chapter 2, he's the temple and he's the one that provides the structure for the whole thing. The next chapters focus upon the laver, the washing and baptismal themes.

And then there's the feeding of the 5,000 and the manna discourse which might be associated with the table of showbread. Chapter 8 and 9 bring us to the lamp within the temple. In the high priestly prayer, we might see the rite of incense.

And in his death, he passes through the Holy of Holies. In chapter 20, we see the open Ark in the Holy of Holies with the angels on either side. And so presenting the temple action later on might disrupt that theological sequence.

There's another possibility. And then the final thing to notice is that in John's gospel, what precipitates the plot to kill Jesus is primarily the raising of Lazarus. It's his love for his friend, his action for his friend that precipitates the plot.

And here, the temple cleansing is put maybe forward so that that could come into sharper relief. Jesus' identity and destiny is bound up with the temple. His very body is the temple.

He is God tabernacling among us. And he is concerned for the house of his father, that it not be made into a den of thieves, that it not be treated as a place that brigands can return to after they've done all these wicked acts, that they can return to the temple and find it as a den that they can have respite in, that they can retreat from all their exploits and find that God protects them, gives them sanctuary for their wicked acts. Yet Christ is the one that comes to the temple and seeks to cleanse it, to set it for its original purpose again.

It might remind us of the story of Nehemiah in chapter 13 of Nehemiah, where he cleanses the worship of Israel in various ways. Again, an example of zeal, cleansing things, clearing things out, and acting with quite violent zeal at that point in the story. Some questions to reflect upon.

The turning of the water into wine is the first of Jesus' signs. Now, signs aren't just spectacular acts, but they're also meaningful acts. I've already pointed out some of the ways in which the water being turned into wine is meaningful.

Can you think of any further ways? There are ways in which this might expose something greater about what Jesus is doing, what his mission means. The second question is, how is it meaningful for Jesus to speak of his body as this temple? Is he just using words in an inappropriate way? Or is there a logic to what he's saying, a theological reasoning?

