

Naked in the Garden  
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Whenever I read the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, I think back to my seminary class on the Pentateuch. A retired Lutheran pastor, Mark Thronveit, was the instructor and he made an evening class not only bearable but interesting as well. This was truly a feat of immense proportions, given that we had just finished supper and were struggling to stay awake.

Well, anyway, I believe I've shared this story with you before but it certainly bears repeating. When Mark presented this story to us, he began by mentioning that there is what is called an anthropomorphic side to God. This simply means that we see God in a more human light, rather than the deity He is. So, for instance, we are told God is walking through the garden. Now let's be realistic, God would probably not actually walk – this is just to make the story easier to remember and so pass on to later generations.

So, God is walking through the garden and what do we hear? He calls out, "Adam, where are you?" Now, think about that a minute. As my professor pointed out, God Himself is looking for Adam, one of the only two people on the entire planet, and we're led to believe God can't find him? Well, it's not so much about the hiding as it is about the sin that's been committed.

Adam has eaten from the forbidden tree and what does he do next? He blames Eve. He has sinned and he is not willing to admit it. So he passes the buck along to Eve. And then what does Eve do? She blames the serpent. She has also sinned and is not willing to admit it. And ever since, we have tried to pass the blame for our sins on to someone else, rather than taking the blame ourselves.

You see, sin is a pretty basic thing. When I commit a sin, it's mine to own, not anyone else's. I did it and I have to own up to it. However, as you can well imagine, because I'm human, that's not typically what I do. I don't want to admit my sinfulness, so I look for an out. I look for an excuse as to why it happened.

But I can take comfort in what we don't hear in today's Gospel passage. After God has spoken to the serpent and said that he would crawl on his belly forever more, God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden. Eve will experience pain in childbirth and Adam will have to labor for his needs. No longer will they have everything they want at their fingertips. Yet, even in the midst of this sin of immense proportions, God begins the process of forgiveness that will last right up to the present day.

The pictures we typically see show Adam and Eve with fig leaves covering certain parts of their bodies. But scripture says God made clothes out of animal skins. That's right, God had already started the healing process by assuring the couple they would at least be able to stay warm.

In the second reading, we heard Paul make mention to the Corinthians that a momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. As Kristin Armstrong reminds us, sometimes our afflictions don't feel momentary or light at all. Without considering the backdrop of eternity as our timetable, our suffering in the moment often feels permanent. Without remembering to exchange burdens with the Lord, the weight of our present pain can be crushing.

Over and over and over we become so preoccupied with the difficulty we see and feel, that we forget to look for what is unseen – God's power to transform us.

And then she talks about one of her favorite sayings, which says that what we focus on expands. Let me repeat that: what we focus on expands. When we focus on our suffering, misery grows. When we focus on abundance, on faith, on God's ability to heal and redeem, hope grows. She concludes that we can change our vision to include the parameters of what is unseen and remember that suffering always produces something valuable on the other side of pain.

Remember, what you focus on expands. As a friend of mine puts it, if you keep doin' what you been doin', you'll keep gettin' what you been gettin'. Focus on misery and you'll be miserable. Focus on God's ability to heal and redeem and you'll find hope. Where would you rather focus?