

Imago Dei, Part I: Leaving Eden
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At the end of December, Countryside posted an invitation to the world, via Facebook, to make a financial contribution to our Tri-Faith relocation campaign. It was gratifying to see a lot of people posting messages of excitement and encouragement – and a few actually giving money. Yet amidst the enthusiasm, there were a couple of naysayers.

One naysayer wrote, “You’re kidding, right?” Another wrote, “Tri-Faith? Is that a joke?” Then he proceeded to explain how if Jesus was right, then Mohamed must be a liar and a deceiver, concluding that this is all “pretty elementary stuff.”

So have we fallen for some elementary, but very large joke, or is the effort to bring Jews, Christians, and Muslims together into a peaceable community a lot more than a joke? More importantly for us as Christians, “Is our participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative something that is faithful to Jesus Christ, whom we claim to be Lord and Savior, or have we gone rogue on the whole Christian tradition?”

Of course, this answer depends on which stream of the Christian tradition you’re looking at. Most of us would not be here right now if we weren’t trying to be faithful to Jesus and Jesus’s God in some way. But how many of us feel adequately prepared to explain ourselves to those who would say we’ve gone rogue?

I know many Countrysiders have already been responding to confused or even belligerent onlookers – and doing so most eloquently. Some of you were a bit nervous about family gatherings over the Christmas holidays, wondering what comment would be made from a particular sister or uncle. My guess is that you were able to respond more adeptly than you would have guessed you were capable of. Jesus once told his followers:

“When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:11-12)

It’s an amazing reality, isn’t it? When we are following where the Holy Spirit is leading us, and when we remain open and responsive to the Spirit’s direction at times when we are challenged, it may not always lead to peaceable relations with those who confront us, but we end up speaking from a place inside us that is quite deeply grounded and peaceful.

Of course, I’m also reminded of the story of Martin Luther’s experience when he took Jesus’s assurance so seriously that he decided not to prepare his sermon one Sunday in advance, but would simply open himself to whatever the Spirit wanted him to say. He

stepped into the pulpit, closed his eyes, and heard the Spirit whisper, “Dummy, you should have PREPARED!”

So in the name of (a) encouraging you to be open to the Spirit in the moment when approached by someone with a question or criticism of your faith, but (b) preparing in advance for those moments so the Spirit has more options to work with, we will be examining the fundamental principles of the Christian faith over the next three worship series.

From now until Pentecost Sunday we will be looking at assumptions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Church itself that demonstrate not only that it is possible to join hands with people of other faiths, but that in our day this is precisely the stance that the Holy Spirit is calling Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others to take toward their neighbor. In other words, by the end of the series you’ll have plenty of resources to draw from to hold your own in a conversation with a naysayer ... or a prospective member.

So, where to begin? We’ll start at the beginning itself. It has been said that you really can’t begin to understand what Jesus was all about unless you understand the Old Testament books of Genesis and Exodus. This first series will focus on each of these books, starting with the story of Adam and Eve.

This story is one of the most beautiful and realistic stories in the Old Testament, yet it has been turned into one of the most horrible and unrealistic stories by certain elements within the Christian tradition that are quite popular right now.

According to belief that turns the story into a horror, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, they committed a sin that so dishonored God that nothing they, or their ancestors, could say or do or repent of would ever make up for it. Thus they, and all of us throughout all generations, stand condemned not only to death but to eternal punishment for this so-called “Original Sin.”

Lucky for Christians, these believers claim, we uniquely get a free pass out of hell, and will live for eternity in heaven while everyone else burns. In our day and age, this means at least two-thirds of the world’s population at any given moment is destined for eternal torture.

Now, imagine a Muslim standing before us making a similar claim – that only Muslims will see heaven while the rest of us burn in hell. Would you find this claim a bit offensive, even arrogant? I mean, how arrogant does one have to be to be so confident in one’s ability to know God and how God works – for eternity – that one can make such an audacious claim *on God’s behalf*?

If we asked our Muslim friend for proof of his claim, he could not turn to the Qur’an, for the Qur’an teaches nothing of the sort. In fact, the Qur’an specifically states that Jews and Christians will be found in heaven. So the only “proof” our friend could turn to would be certain *interpretations* of the Qur’an, all of which are highly disputed and

none of which come directly from God but are the product of human imagination. In other words, our poor friend would be willing to threaten two-thirds of the world's population with eternal damnation – on God's behalf – based not on divine revelation, but on his certainty that someone else who interpreted the Qur'an in a certain way in spite of the Qur'an plainly stating otherwise is right. Is this not the height of human arrogance and Pride?

Okay, let's lay off our Muslim friend. The truth is that, while certain Muslim extremists do believe this way, only a fraction even of the extremists do, since the Qur'an is so explicit about Jews and Muslims being God's people.

No, the vast majority of people who hold this kind of belief about heaven and hell are Christians. And their beliefs are based on just as shaky ground as our Muslim example. Unfortunately, this Christian view so pervades our society that it doesn't really strike us as being odd or arrogant or prideful anymore, but something that is simply established Christian view.

Just yesterday, for instance, after preaching Countrysider Greg Kucinsky's memorial sermon and opening the floor up to the crowd to share stories of Greg's life, a young Christian man stood up who attends another church and basically preached the mini-sermon he'd hoped to hear from me but didn't. He reminded the crowd *several* times that if they want to meet Greg in heaven, they must be "right with the Lord," and if not, they'll "go the other way." That was a kind and gentle way of telling many of those in grief at yesterday's service to grieve not for Greg but for themselves all the more, for unless they are Christian they hang by a slender thread over a lake of fire.

And to think that this entire belief finds its origin in the story of Adam and Eve ... not even the story itself but interpretations of the story, most of which did not arise for well over a thousand years after the story was first written.

So remember, this is the version of horror – the one that keeps us in a trap of condemning everyone who is not like us to hell. Now, for the better version that's truer to the actual story.

When Adam and Eve sin in the Garden, it is true that life becomes much harder than before. After all, they are now alienated from God (shown in their initial hiding), alienated from each other (shown in their passing off blame), and alienated from nature itself (shown in lowered productivity of the land and the enmity between the humans and the snake). When you are at odds with God, your fellow humans, and nature, life is bound to be harder, regardless of what caused it. That's not punishment. That's living with the consequences of your actions. The story also tells us that they are ashamed of themselves and seek to cover their bodies with fig leaves.

How does God respond to all this? Rather than pronouncing the couple cursed forever or giving them even the briefest rundown on their eventual home in hell, we find God doing the last thing we'd expect a God of Wrath to do. Even though God is perfectly okay with the couple being naked, God knows the couple are ashamed. So God

graciously makes garments of skins for Adam and Eve to help ease their shame. Does this sound like the God of Wrath to you?

If you take the story at its word, it seems that God would have been perfectly content to allow the newly-smocked residents to remain in the Garden of Eden forever, despite their alienation from God, each other, and nature. According to the story, God only kicked the couple out once God realized that if they remained in the Garden they might also eat from the Tree of Eternal Life and live forever in the alienated state they were in.

God doesn't want God's humans to live in a state of permanent alienation. After all, human beings were created in God's own image and likeness – the *imago dei*. God's desire is for eventual unity, not separation. So God shows the couple the door, then plants angels at the door with flaming swords to ensure that they cannot get back in. Do you see what's happening here? God is not punishing the couple, but *protecting* them: protecting them from turning any of their mistakes then or in the future into eternal ones.

The mythological story of Adam and Eve shows us that we are definitely *marked* by Original Sin, but that we are not *defined* by it. We are defined by Original Grace. God's Grace that does not exempt us from the consequences of our sin but does free us from sin's shame; Grace that invites us to humble ourselves each day by accepting the gifts God brings us to help us survive in a difficult world; Grace that sets a boundary on the amount of time we can live so that none of our mistakes are eternal. The only part of us that is allowed entrance back to the Garden is that part of us that passes through the gate with the fiery sword and is thus *transformed* by death back into the *imago dei* we were created to be.

Finally, you may ask what the purpose of Jesus is if he did not come to keep us from living in hell in the next life. That's easy: he came to keep us from living in hell in *this* life by showing us where to find heaven in this life. And the primary place he taught us to find heaven is at those intersections where we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength ... and love our neighbor as ourselves.