

Sermon: *The Snake is Still Speaking (and there is something you can do about it)*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels by the Sea 6.9.24

I have a question for you: what is the first question asked in the Bible?

Several theologians I follow suggest that we pay close attention to the questions in the Bible. They are important and there are not that many of them. In particular, we are to follow close attention to the questions that Jesus' raises. But, back to my question, what's the first question in the Bible. If you are looking at today's reading from Genesis, you are on the right track. The first question is from God to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" Like a parent looking for a child – where are you? I don't think God is mad; Adam and Eve have a standing appointment with God to go for a walk in the afternoon breeze. On this day, however, Adam and Eve didn't show up because they ate fruit from the forbidden tree and were ashamed. They hid from God, which is why God called, out, "Where are you?"

What is the second question in the Bible? "Who told you that you are naked?" These questions come from a heartbroken God – *where are you? Who told you that you are naked?*

Many believe this is one of the earliest stories written about humankind and God. Although the first chapter of Genesis begins with, "In the beginning, God said, 'Let there be light.'" That chapter, it is believed, was written after the story of Adam and Eve. What do you think about the Bible now that you know what the first two questions posed in it – where are you and who told you that you are naked? How does that set the scene for what the rest of the stories will unfold. There is another character, of course, in the story. It is the serpent, or the snake as I will refer to it from here on out. The snake told Adam and Eve that they are naked, they felt ashamed, and they hid from God. That's the story; the ancient story; of humankind and God. Adam and Eve looked the same from before the fruit and after it, but they fell under the suggestion by the snake to feel ashamed. Unfortunately, I need to tell you that the snake is still speaking. It's the voice that you might be familiar with. It says that you are not good enough, or too old, or too young, or too tall or too short, too fat or too thin, that you are weak, not smart enough, not good enough. Does this sound familiar? Or am I the only one who hears this voice?

The snake is still speaking. This isn't a commentary on the geopolitical state of the world and that the snake is still speaking and causing countries to war with each other. Although if you think that, it's fine. What I'm talking about is the intimate quiet voice that each one of us hears that makes us feel less than we really are. It's the voice of insecurity that Adam and Eve heard for the first time after they ate the forbidden fruit. The snake's voice of insecurity, although quiet and subtle is also unrelentless. Personal insecurity can cause us to do horrible things to ourselves and others. But it's personal and, from my experience, everyone hears it from time to time.

I remember hearing the snake speak clearly when I stepped onto the campus of my seminary in Berkeley, California for the first time. We had just sold our beautiful house in Spokane Washington. We watched it get built and added to the designs. But, God called, we packed up and left. Speaking of leaving, we left our daughter Galina in Spokane and moved our daughter Victoria and Ethan who was 20 months old at the time. We sold everything and moved in with my in-laws. (It's hard to imagine but, twenty years ago we did it)

After all that, I stepped onto the storied campus of my divinity school and that's when I heard the voice. It's not like "hearing" a voice but like remembering an animated conversation in my head – you know how a conversation can roll around in your head after it is over. It's like that. Here's what the voice said: *Well you did at this time; you fooled everybody including yourself. You think you can stand here; you think you can do this? You think you're smart enough?! You just sold everything you had, and you put your whole family on the line. You fooled them and yourself.*

Do you know of this voice of the snake? Have you ever heard something like this whispered into your psyche that says you are not good enough or can't measure up? It's the type of voice that brings shame and makes us want to hid – even from God. That's the snake. And, it's still speaking.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus addresses the snake. The "scribes" (there were two types of scribes that we know about in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. There were scribes who wrote down what notable people said in speeches and lectures and the like. They'd then sell their scrolls, kind of like an ancient newspaper. It is believed that many of Jesus' public sermons were captured this way and sold [which is why there are so many copies of them]. The second type of "scribe" is a legal expert. That's most likely the group that is addressing Jesus in this story) said this of Jesus: "He has Beelzebul [*lit. Lord of Flies*], and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." Because the legal experts deal in logic, Jesus responded to them by using logic. His response was this: *How can satan cast out satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself it cannot stand; a house divided against itself will not stand. If satan has risen up against himself and is divided his end has come.*

It's logic – a house divided will fall. It's irrefutable. Then, Jesus being who he is, goes on from there with an interesting parable: *No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.*

Is he saying that the "strong man" is satan? I think so. Christian writing state unequivocally that after his crucifixion, Jesus descended to the dead, or hell, and released the captives that were there. The house of satan was plundered because Jesus first tied him up.

Let's look at it this way: have you ever asked someone to dance? Or on a date? Or to marry you? Have you ever said yes, or no, to someone who asked you to marry? In order to ask someone to dance, or get married, you need to suspend that voice of insecurity for a while. The voice of the snake, the voice of insecurity, says, "You are not worthy of being loved." You must bind up that voice first to act in love.

Repeated in many different ways in the Bible, we are told over and over again that we are loveable and capable. We are loveable – we are worthy to be loved and worthy to give love. And, we are capable of both love and loving and capable of doing more than we ask or imagine. Jesus tell us that God is love and that we are loveable and capable. The snake is trying to tell us the opposite. We have the power and the ability to bind up the snake's voice, the voice of insecurity, and to love and be loved.

If you'd like to see an example of this, take a look at our baptismal covenant on page 302 in the book of Common Prayer. There are six questions asked to those seeking baptism, those seeking confirmation and those seeking to renew their baptismal covenant.

The first three questions are binding up the voice of the snake. Before we get to that, I have to tell you about the word Jesus uses for the satan. In Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), *the say-tan* is literally translated into English as *the-one-who-causes-stumbling*. Or the stumbling-one (but not the one who stumbles but the one who makes another stumble). Back when I was a camp counsellor, we would take a switchback trail up to the cafeteria. One of the switchbacks had a fir tree root that stuck three inches up across the trail. Most campers would trip on it if they didn't know it was there. The counsellors had to show them where it was so they could step over it. Why didn't we just remove the root? First, it's a giant root for a centuries old tree that held up a quarter of the hillside. If we dug deep and removed it, the trail would wash away. In other words, it's beyond our power to remove it; we could, however, step over it so that it would not *say-tan* us.

In that light, let's read the first three questions in the baptismal covenant. *Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?* The response: I renounce them. Question number two: *Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?* The response: I renounce them. Question number three: *Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?* The response (say it with me): I renounce them.

The three questions that follow are about turning to Jesus and accepting him as our savior, to put our whole trust in his grace and love and promising to follow and obey him as our Lord.

Do you see how we first tie up the strong man? We bind the voice of the snake by renouncing all the spiritual forces that rebel against God, the evil powers of the world, and we renounce all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. By renouncing these things, we are renouncing the voice of insecurity that tell us we are not good enough or worthy enough. Once the strong man is bound; once our insecurity is put in its place; we then can accept Jesus, follow him and put our whole trust in his grace and love. Likewise, to ask someone's hand in marriage, or to say yes, or even to ask someone to dance, we first bind our insecurity – the voice that says we are not loveable and capable – and then we are free to love and share it with someone else.

I have one more story for you. The first birthday party I went to for a centenarian was in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Just before Betty turned 100, she told me about a dream she had. In it, a voice like a whisper said to *not bother showing up to her birthday celebration because no one will show up. No one cares enough about her to show up to an old woman's birthday. She's outlived her husband, her friends, most of the members of her family and she did not have any children; so why bother, don't go, no one will be there.* Thankfully, Betty has learned how to renounce that voice. She showed up and the whole church was there as well as what felt like half the community. It was a great celebration. One that she told me she almost missed because of her insecurity. This story tells me that as long as we are still drawing breath on this planet, the snake will be whispering insecurity to us. The good news is that we have the power to renounce the voice and to remember what our Savior told us – we are loveable and capable. So, when you hear the whispering voice of insecurity, remember to whisper back, "I renounce you. I renounce the voice of insecurity that says I am not good enough. I renounce you and believe what my savior taught me, I am loveable and I am capable.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen and alleluia.