

"They heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze..."

That idyllic line opens a story which is anything but.
You heard in that first reading, from Genesis,
the story about the first two humans -- and the serpent.
Since this is a passage we might think we know,
and which has long garnered much interpretation and mis-interpretation,
I thought today we'd *take a little walk with God in that garden.*

Now you might not think we have much of a breeze this hot, humid June morning.
But do you recall what the word "breeze" represents in Scripture?
It's related to breath, wind, *spirit*. So even if the air feels a bit heavy,
we still have the benefit of the breeze in which God walks
because it's the SPIRIT – what, since Pentecost, we call the Holy Spirit.

Just before this passage opens, earlier in the chapter,
the female (no name yet) encounters the "crafty" (or "clever") serpent
who points out the delectable tree in the middle of the garden. (No apple is mentioned.)

The female dutifully reports that God has told them they can eat
anything in the whole big beautiful garden except that one particular tree.
Many of us know from the children in our lives that
the one thing you tell them they can't have is the thing they most want.
It's why a lot of weight loss programs tell you not to consider any food inherently "bad"
because that just makes you crave it more.

And here's another human truth quickly revealed: the urge to try to be like God.
Whether it's trying to make ourselves invincible, or
projecting a façade of perfection, or
fooling ourselves into thinking we're in control.
Whatever it happens to look like in our lives, we all know
the futile fight to pretend we've got it all together all the time.

So, as any of us would likely do, the female tastes the fruit. She shares it with the male.
She doesn't cram it down his throat. He doesn't hesitate.
She doesn't "tempt" him, nor does he resist. They simply eat together as people do.

That's the prelude of today's passage, when God strolls in with the evening breeze.
Note that God is still with them,
even after they've done the one thing God asked them not to do.

God doesn't give up on them, but seeks them out, asking: *Where are you?*

That's a good question.

It's a good question to look in the mirror and occasionally ask ourselves. Where are you?

Where are you in life? In your relationships? Where are you spiritually?

Where are you with coming to terms with your white privilege?

Where are you in terms of coming out of this pandemic?

Are you in a good place? Where are you *now*?

The male gives an answer that many of us should be able to relate to, if we're honest.

He admits that he's afraid, wanting to hide and, well, *naked*. Vulnerable. Raw.

Friends, I'm up here on a hot day wearing at least three layers of clothing,
and you know what – before God, I'm buck naked.

And so are you, and every other human creature who ever lived.

And you know what else? That's OK.

God knows us better than we know ourselves.

God knows all those warts and imperfections we try to hide, and

all the tricks we use to try to kid ourselves and others into thinking we've got it figured out.

God sees through it to who we really are, and loves us even so.

But, once again, as we are all wont to do, the male misses this great and comforting truth.

He's too busy trying to cover his buck nakedness by passing the buck.

He blames the only other person he knows – the female.

Then she turns around and blames the serpent. And on it goes.

As if God wasn't there with them all the time, knowing the truth,

inviting them, still, into the cool breeze of the Spirit.

The story ends with an extended prose-poem

from God to the serpent, the male and the female.

Today we read only the beginning stanza.

But later in chapter 3 (and, kids, you could read this for yourself at home!),

it concludes with the *truest truth* of the human condition:

"You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Oh, we can strive to convince ourselves otherwise, but the enduring truth is that we're mere mortals.

We can put on layer upon layer of pretense, but we're still naked.

We're dust, and to dust we shall return –

I say, not only on Ash Wednesday but today

looking at the simple beauty of the Memorial Garden where so many of our loved ones now rest.

We too are dust and to dust we shall return.

So where are you?

I'd like to hope that by now we recognize ourselves in this story from Genesis.

That we see it not as a story that happened back then,

or something that was once and done sealing our fate forever.

But a story that describes where we are now.

A story that stops us in our tracks long enough to ask: Where are you?

Are you chasing things you know aren't healthy or helpful for you?

Are you blaming others instead of confessing wrongs and making amends?

Are you honest enough to admit at least to yourself that you're naked and vulnerable,
that you need God – and you need the rest of us too.

Where are you with accepting that you are dust – precious and beloved of God,
but with finite time to walk this earth before returning to dust?

Where are you with that?

About this archetypal story we've read today,

the Old Testament scholar Samuel Terrien has said that it both
never happened, and happens every day.

I'll leave it to you to decide if you think it's crucial to take this story literally.

For me, the keener interest is not whether this story

happened to the earliest human specimens,

but that it's happening to us today. Happening in real time to me. To you.

No matter where we are, no matter how complicated we've let our lives become,

no matter how many lies we've told ourselves and others,

God comes to us where we are. Asking about us. Caring about us. Loving us.

Urging us to at last tell the truth about our lives.

Always inviting us to share in the cool breeze of God's Spirit.

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