

The Journey to Christmas: Hope Begins In Eden

Genesis 3:1-24

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith

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Take A Sad Little Trip

I remember it clearly. It was a five-minute road trip conversation that forever changed how I understood my father. He and I were headed to Denver to see my Grandma Smith over the New Year's holiday that would be forever immortalized as Y2K.¹ My dad grew up in Denver, Colorado which was about ten to twelve hours' drive away from where he went to college in my hometown in Oklahoma.² In college is where he met my mother and during a Christmas break back in Denver, he determined to make a hasty return trip on New Year's Eve to see her before a bad winter storm rolled in.

On the way out, my dad had a knockdown, dragout with his father, my Grandpa Smith. Grandpa said only drunks and idiots are out driving on New Year's Eve. My dad didn't care for his opinion and stormed out screaming. A few hours down the road in Limon, Colorado, my dad decided to call home and apologize. When my uncle answered, he simply told my dad to come back home because their dad had died not long after he left. He died that night of kidney failure.

As dad stopped talking, I realized that is why we had our annual visit to Denver over New Year's. The guilt of that last interaction being a fight meant my dad swore my grandma would never be alone again on New Year's Eve. I understood my dad better. I saw how sadness and regret framed his entire life. His journey forward was one of deeply inset sadness.

My dad never got to have that moment of redemption and forgiveness. He lived under this curse, this dark cloud. His life was defined moving forward by that sadness. My dad always seemed to be waiting for some hope, but I am not certain that he ever experienced it.

¹ In preparation, my grandmother had me fill up her bathtub with water and we carefully watched the ball drop on tv because her theory was Y2K would happen in New York two hours before it happened in Denver and that should give us ample time to prepare food to eat for the few days that she expected power to be out. Of course nothing happened and she and my dad got "warmed up" drinking Canadian whiskey and listening to Laurence Welk records. I assume most 25-year-olds celebrated Y2K in similar fashion.

² Both of my parents were students at the now-defunct Phillips University. It was a Disciples of Christ denominational college that drew many people from Colorado.

I understand this is a sad beginning for a Christmas series, but it is appropriate because so many people live in this sadness because they don't realize that the journey to Christmas is a hopeful journey. And it is a journey that begins at the beginning in Genesis 3. (read text)

History not Mythology

It is important to realize that our journey begins in a real place and at a specific point in actual history. This isn't some mythology. This isn't some made up story to "fill in the gaps." Genesis 3 deals with an actual event that would change the course of everything that followed. We understand that this is the story of a tree in a garden and how man was fundamentally changed. This was a complete change. And this was an eternal change.

The tree in the garden is the starter's pistol for the journey to Christmas. If you are viewing this journey through your smart phone, it would tell you, "starting route to Christmas. Head out from the garden."

We know that Adam and Eve were dismissed from the garden after they broke God's straightforward guidelines. Everything was there for the man and the woman to experience in this perfect situation. And the serpent came along and distorted the truth and they both broke the guidelines. They fell short of the standard God had set before them. They fell. In theological shorthand, this act is referred to as "The Fall." The Fall is noted for both the willing participation of the man and woman to break God's guidelines and the serpent who aggressively lies and distorts their understanding of what God desires.

The Serpent

In the ancient world, serpents were often the objects of curses. The ancient Israelites would've understood that serpents raise up off their bellies to strike, to rear up in aggression. Crawling on their bellies is a non-threatening posture. To tread on a serpent crawling on its belly was to overcome or defeat it. This curse is God dealing with the aggressive nature of the serpent.

It is certainly unique to begin our journey to Christmas by dealing with Satan and his presence in the story, but we need to understand all the players if we are to fully grasp what Christmas means for our hope. And the serpent is a critical player during this moment.

It is important to understand that when God deals with the Fall, he curses both the ground and the serpent. Adam and Eve are not cursed, at least the term “cursed” is not used. While it is true that Adam and Eve experience very negative consequences, God is not being harsher than his earlier words. He told Adam and Eve what would happen if they ate from that tree.

God’s words may be better understood as being parental in nature, patiently but sadly describing to Adam and Eve the inevitable consequences of the choices they have made for themselves. These words are descriptive for them, as he clarifies consequences. The words are not prescriptive as God imposing conditions through curse-like statements or first-person verbs. God is clarifying what Adam and Eve have chosen. But God is prescribing what God will cause to happen to the serpent.

Remember, the serpent lied to Adam and Eve. Those lies changed the way that they thought about God. That is still Satan’s main attack today. He wants to distort our perception and understanding of God and His word so that we will change what we believe about God. If Satan can get us to think wrongly about sin or about the consequences of sin, it will change what we think about God. If we don’t think that sin is all that bad, we may not consider salvation something that is necessary. You can see the issue here that God is dealing with as God curses Satan.

When God addresses the serpent, we read a sequence where God deals with the serpent as a beast in verse fourteen. God prescribes a curse for the beast and then describes further that there are now new consequences for the serpent after this distortion of God.

God is now cursing the serpent because of those lies and distortions. We see God’s prescription of a curse here: “you are more cursed than any other animal.” And then God defines that curse. “You will move on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life.” God is cursing Satan’s aggression toward humans. That doesn’t mean that Satan is now “less aggressive.” But time is running out for Satan. And when Jesus came, the Lord would render the enemy silent and drive him out. Satan would not be able to distort and lie about Jesus in the presence of Jesus. In fact, the demons would clearly demonstrate submission and yielding to the power of God.

Satan’s aggressive nature was not removed. The serpent was not defanged in how the enemy will prowl, devour, steal, kill, and destroy.

But God pronounces defeat in that moment. The enemy will be defeated and overcome by One who will be born of a woman.

You see, that is the promise of eating dirt. This isn't a commentary about the diet of snakes. This is God describing the endgame of this curse is destruction for the serpent. Israelites who would look forward to the first Advent of the Messiah were taught that dust was the food of those in Sheol or the netherworld. For Israelites waiting for the Messiah, this curse describes the grave. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Dust fills the mouth of the corpse and dust will fill the mouth of the serpent. The curse placed on the serpent points to the One will come and force the enemy into submission (crawling on the belly) and death (eating dust).

God follows this in verse fifteen with another prescriptive statement imposing a condition on the serpent. God will put hostility between the serpent and One who will come. God then provides further definition of this curse in a mutual striking. The serpent will strike "His" heel, but "He" will strike the serpent's head.

And it is here that we find our hope. Here is where the journey to Christmas begins. After the Fall at the tree in the garden, God points us to another tree that will come when the Messiah brings victory of sin and death and hell. This second tree, on a hill far away, is the site of both strikes we read about in verse fifteen. God will deal with the sad reality of our sinfulness there with that second tree. And yes, that reality is sad. We are surrounded by sadness because of sin.

The Infinite Sadness

There is a degree to which we deeply feel and acknowledge sadness. We exist in a condition that is marked by sadness because of our sin. Without Jesus, sadness is the most appropriate emotion to feel because it is in continuity with reality. Because of our sin, it is acceptable to be honestly sad. Life after that tree in the garden changed completely and changed forever.

We reflect on what began in the garden. We understand that the trajectory of our lives before the tree and after the tree are completely different. What happened in the garden at the tree forever changed us. Sin separated us. Shame engulfed us. We were driven from God's presence because of His holiness and our sinfulness.

Creation, which God acknowledged as being good, was cursed because of our sin. All life here was marked with futility and corruption and pain. The Bible tells us that creation groans in the pain of childbirth without relief.³ Sin cursed creation with unrelenting agony and creation longs to be free from it just like people do.

But without Jesus, there is no hope. Only sadness. Sadness because every other alternative to dealing with this sinful condition falls short. Everything outside of God's grace in Christ is insufficient. Life after the tree in the garden is marked by sin, pain, agony, and sadness.

The tree in the garden was a terrible, terrible experience. However, there, in that terrible, terrible experience God himself prophesies about a wonderful, wonderful hope to come.

Another tree would follow that first one in the garden.⁴ Only this tree was on a hill far away from us but not all that far from Bethlehem. While we don't know where the garden was located, we know where Bethlehem is. That hill upon which stood that tree, the cross, was about a two hour walk from Bethlehem. And if you trust in Jesus, life after that second tree changes completely and forever.

The hope that God points us toward in the garden after the first tree is realized centuries later on the hill after the second tree. Jesus is our hope. Jesus is the promised "He" in verse 15. Our hope is set before us to be received by grace through faith. We can be saved by the Son of God. We can be forgiven of our sins because of the atonement of Jesus Christ on that second tree on that hill in Jerusalem.

Further, our hope is set before us to be experienced by grace through faith. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit that sanctifies us progressively and it is the Holy Spirit that is gifting us to serve.

What a powerful statement God makes in cursing the serpent. That second tree was both the heel strike and the head strike God spoke of in verse 15.

³ Romans 8:22

⁴ Acts 10:39

While Jesus as a man did have to die on the cross, the Bible tells us that because Jesus as a man shared flesh and blood with us, through his death he destroyed the one holding the power of death – that is the devil.⁵

Our journey to hope began in the garden. God promised that One would come and provide the cure for sin. Jesus did that for us. He has come to provide hope for us. You can receive that gift of hope today because you can receive Jesus.

Today, if you have never done so, would you begin your journey in the hope of Jesus Christ?

⁵ Hebrews 2:14

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:

What is the most memorable road trip you made as a child or teenager growing up?

When you think about Christmas, do you have memories about any particular family tradition or gathering? Why do you think it stands out?

The holidays also usher in more acute seasons of depression and sadness for people as they experience regret, grief, loneliness and more. Have you ever thought that it is totally normal to experience sadness considering what took place in the aftermath of Genesis 3? Why does it make sense to have such sadness in context of that curse of the earth and pain of sin?

When do you feel the most hopeful in your life? What experiences do you consider as being full of hope?

How does Christmas prepare your heart to experience joy?

What is the difference between happiness and joy?

What New Testament passages speak to the power that Jesus had over Satan and Satan's demons?