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Adam, Ayeka?

Genesis 3:1-10

You've all seen TV preachers. Well, maybe you've seen the TV rabbi too—Marc Gellman, one half of the “God-Squad” that appears on CNN now and then. I mention him because some of what I am going to say this morning is taken from things he said first about the Book of Genesis, and I want you to know that, for the sake of truth in advertising.

Today we heard the ancient story about our first parents, Adam and Eve, who ate forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. I want to focus on the moment soon after they took those fateful bites, when God went for a walk in the cool of the evening.

Adam and Eve, reclining among the vines, are savoring the luscious fruit. All of a sudden they hear God's footsteps. They jump to their feet, wipe pomegranate juice from their mouths, run hard for the trees, and hide. And that was when God asked the very first question God asks of anyone in the whole Bible—“*Ayeka?*” Where are you?

That was God's question. Here is another. Why does the God who created everything, who knows everything, and sees everything need to ask Adam where he is? Shouldn't God know where to find him?

Of course God knows, but maybe God wants Adam to come out of his own free will and 'fess up before God punishes him, a little like a parent calling a kid on the carpet using his middle name. (Marc Gellman says that the only reason for the existence of middle names in the first place is “to give parents a way of letting kids know that life as they have known it up until then is over because of something they broke, said, did, or hit.”) When you hear your middle name, if you're smart, you 'fess up fast.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Martin Buber had another theory about why God asks Adam where he is. He tells a story about a famous Russian rabbi who is imprisoned by the Tsar. His jailor is a biblically literate fellow, and so the two men kill time arguing about the scriptures. “So,” the jailor asks, “Why did God, the all-knowing, ask Adam, ‘Where are you?’”

The rabbi answers, “Do you believe that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation, and every person is included in them?”

“Yes,” the guard replies.

“So it is, then,” says the rabbi, “that in every era, God asks every person, ‘Where are you in your world? You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?’”

The jailor just happens to be forty-six years old. When he hears the rabbi say “forty-six”, he is overcome and starts to weep. He understands that “it is not God who needs to ask Adam where he is; it is Adam who needs to be asked. It’s not God who needs to ask us *ayeka?*, but we who need to be asked.”

The story of Adam and Eve’s transgression and God’s first question is sometimes read in synagogues as the Torah portion around the time of Yom Kippur. As you know, that is the Jewish high holy day set aside for locating yourself in the moral world and giving an accounting of your life to God. On that day of atonement, if you see that you are not in a different and better place than you were the year before, you have a chance to ‘fess up, turn yourself around, and try again.

Now, from this pulpit, I’ve always tried to steer us away from striving for moral perfection. I have also reminded us of the great Protestant axiom that God is not in the *quid pro quo* business. You cannot make God approve of you by doing good works. God accepts us already, without our say-so and without our striving or our deeds. But this truth does not erase the need to practice personal and communal virtue.

After being called on their bad behavior, people sometimes say, “But what can I do about it? It’s just who I am.” (Just Manny being Manny!) But being who you are does not mean that you are what God intends you to be—a mature, ethical and decent person. God loves you in your immaturity, and loves you no matter what else may not be so great about you; but if you are to be a blessing in the world, God also requires that you don’t make excuses, that you don’t hide your moral condition from yourself, and that you make a grace-supported effort to grow and change.

That God loves me (as the old hymn says) “just as I am, without one plea” is true, but it can also be a cop-out. The truth is that it’s precisely because we swim in God’s sea of mercy and acceptance that we have compelling reason—and we are given the courage—to be good and to do good. It is because God embraces us unconditionally that we cannot remain indifferent to the moral challenges of life in kinship with everyone and everything in God’s precious world. Deeds can’t force God to love us, but they can and do express how grateful and glad we are that God already does.

And so we need to ask ourselves just how grateful and glad we are—that is, we need to give an accounting of the ways in which we regularly respond to God’s free grace through active deeds of mercy and justice in the world, and through our personal and communal growth in the virtues that characterize a well-practiced

Christian life. All of which is simply another way of asking ourselves God's question to Adam, "Where are you?"

Now, deferred maintenance of our moral lives is as unwise a policy for souls as it is for houses, cars, and teeth—not to mention churches. That is why Jews examine their lives every year on Yom Kippur. And that is why every week in worship at First Church we observe a mini-Yom Kippur. We routinely take time for confession, time to listen for that critical question that flushes us out of hiding and lets us know that hiding does not work—*Ayeka?* Where are you?

But no matter how often we engage in self-reflection, it won't do us much good unless it is honest. We human beings are usually stubbornly evasive of the truth about ourselves, so much so that you could almost say it's an inherited trait. Just listen to the pitiful reply our father Adam offered to God: "I heard you in the garden," he says, "and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid."

It sounds truthful enough at first hearing, but notice that Adam fails to mention the fruit. He says only that he was afraid to be naked before God, although being naked in the Garden had been perfectly fine and had never troubled him (or God) before. God, who is patient, gives Adam another chance to be transparent by pressing him further, "How do you know that you are naked? Did you eat fruit from the tree of knowledge?"

Uh-oh! The jig is up, Adam! God knows. But Adam still tries to worm out of it. He says, "The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit, and I ate it."

Bad answer. He blames God for giving him the woman. He blames Eve for giving him the fruit. As Marc Gellman says, "When God asks, 'Where are you?', Adam answers, 'Where was everybody else?'" Adam is history's first recorded victim. Like our parent Adam, we all believe that actions should have consequences—unless they are *our* actions. Adam deceives himself, and he ought to be ashamed. But he isn't.

Now, when I say he should be ashamed, I don't mean the kind of shame that you go into therapy for—that debilitating emotion of which many people are truly victims and which undermines all their painful efforts to make constructive changes in their lives. That shame insists that we are bad, no matter how good we are and no matter how much good we do. This is the shame our Christian faith is aimed at like a laser. It is an intolerable and undeserved burden of unworthiness and worthlessness that Jesus wants to remove from us by inviting us to trust the God whose everlasting delight we are, and will never cease to be.

But there is another kind of shame—a good and necessary kind. It is an honest, healthy response of embarrassment and regret for what we have truly done wrong. It makes no excuses, blames no one else, and clears the way to reconciliation, growth and change. It is the difference between the self-loathing and abject shame that an alcoholic knows as she hits bottom, and the liberating, insightful shame that

comes when she “works the program” of AA, and thereby becomes able to make amends and build a new and healthy life. This latter kind of shame is energy, and more—it can be and often is a saving grace.

I was talking with someone the other day about the way I sometimes treated my mother when I was twenty-three and knew everything. When I recall the unkind and condescending things I said and did to her, I still get red and hot and feel like a worm. Simply put, I feel ashamed.

Now, you may want to let me off the hook. You may want to remind me that I was but a callow youth, that she has probably forgotten all about this stuff by now, and that I should forget it too. But I hope I always feel ashamed. And I hope that I will never forget not only what I did, but also that I am quite capable of doing it again. I want to remember because this kind of shame is the engine of the moral life that leads us “to rebuild that life after we have done something to weaken it or tear it down.” It is the threshold of humility and even the foundation of holiness and heroism.

During the Holocaust, Gellman writes, there were Gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews. There were other Gentiles who were complicit or indifferent. What was the difference between them? He cites evidence that it was not education or politics or even attitudes towards Jews. What distinguished the righteous Gentiles from the bystanders was that the rescuers were all connected “to communities that had a well-developed sense of right and wrong, and they had a powerful sense of moral agency and shame.” They said that they could not have lived with themselves or answered to God if they had not done what they did. Their communities had prepared the way for their courage “by teaching them how to feel constructive shame and building them up in virtue.”

It is no accident that the civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid struggle were rooted in churches. It was in communities of faith where people saw the moral vision of right and wrong, justice and hope that compelled them to act. It was also where they received the training in virtue that gave them the courage to put their lives at risk again and again. In community there was strength and accountability. In community there was discernment, challenge and correction.

The deepest truth about the moral life is that we can’t go it alone. Gellman suggests that this is why Adam was so evasive and could not answer God with integrity. He had no one except Eve before whom he could examine his soul and confess his failings, and she was as implicated as he was. Adam had no community to give him courage to face himself, to experience a healthy shame, and to rebuild the world he had wounded. It was, Gellman says, “just him and Eve, a snake, and a few monkeys.”

To hear and answer *ayeka* in a way that becomes a great blessing, we need solid communities of moral reflection, moral instruction and moral challenge. And the question I would like to leave us with today is whether and in what ways we are

one of them. *Ayeka*, First Church, where are you?

To answer this question will require more honesty than we might be accustomed to. We suspect that our congregation may not be perfect. We know that we are not perfect. But sometimes we act as if we and our congregation were truly the top of the heap. We hide from our own reality, and we find people and events on which to offload the responsibility for our communal and personal weaknesses. But when it comes to moral transformation, honesty is indispensable, because the practice of transparency indicates great trust in God's love, and it is by love alone that we are ultimately changed.

Therefore, if we still don't pay much sustained attention to new people in our midst, and yet we say we are a welcoming way of hospitality; or if we fret constantly about the church's budget and yet profess faith in God's abundance; or if we claim to love our children and yet never agree to teach the little ones or work with the youth when asked; or if we say that we are committed to the gospel and yet we never make any significant change in our lifestyle or take any serious risks for its sake; and if we give less than 10 percent of our income to charity and yet claim to be charitable and generous people; or if we spend more time watching TV than reading books and yet claim to be learned and wise; or if we spend time with clients that we rob from our families and yet claim to be good family people; then you and I and this congregation might need to get a little more real before we try to answer God's question, *ayeka*, again.

The more honest we become, the more chance we will have of welcoming without fear the footsteps of God in our gardens. The more we 'fess up, the more likely it is that we will emerge at last from all our childish hiding places that do not hide us anyway. And the more transparent we are to the truth of ourselves, the more likely that the resulting shame will be an engine of human excellence, a springboard for heroic resistance, a spur to holy risk, and a fount of the most lasting kind of joy.