

Beelzebul and the Blame Game

Lectionary 10: Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:20-35, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Hymn: *Christ is Alive! Let Christians Sing!* (ELW #389)

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Rev. Nick Utpfall

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, ELCA

Ah, playing the ol' blame game.

This 1st reading from Genesis isn't so much how ancient predecessors introduced original sin into our genetic make-up. Yet it's probably such an enduring story because it really is the prototype for so much of our behavior, which is unfortunate in showing how quickly accusations fly and make us all victims. Nobody comes out smelling like roses.

It begins with the serpent instigating some distrust of God, which is played out with the woman and the man disobeying God and eating the fruit. God confronts this disobedience, and then come repercussions, both in God's response to their actions and in their own response. And their response is filled with blame. The man not only blames the woman, but also blames God, saying, "The woman *you gave me* told me to eat." The woman, in turn, blames the serpent. This is the unending slippery slope of the blame game, everyone accusing and everyone victimized.

This story has had huge influence not just on our religious views, but all of culture. It may or may not play into our common dislike for slimy serpents, viewing them as sneaky or even evil. Certainly it has had terrible, tragic consequences for women in society. Women have been constantly burdened with the man's blame, expanded into a notion of being somehow weaker and more susceptible to

temptation. This story has been mustered to foster male-dominated hierarchies, pretending that men are somehow more blameless and more discerning.

That, first of all, contradicts the story. The woman is the one who ponders the theological argument and makes a decision, while the man is mostly passive, portrayed almost like a hungry baby. But, much more to the point, when this story is used to blame women it just shows the unfortunate reality this prototypical story tries to portray in the first place, of accusing and victimizing, of refusing to move on, to reconcile, to work together. Instead it dwells in the past and tries to make that define the future.

You see, we use blame to put a box around offenders and say that some previous action must be an indicator, a predictor of other future misbehavior. It's a prejudice that presumes guilt, and we just continue feeding into that stinky trap, that slippery slope of the blame game. It is not just this denigration of serpents or of women; the blame and accusations and subsequent breakdown of relationships keep right on spreading throughout our culture. This sad isolationism appears by blaming Mexican immigrants of stealing jobs. It's in the accusation that homosexual relationships are a threat to heterosexual marriage. It is on airlines that pull aside anybody with a hint of being Arabic or Muslim, as immediately suspect of perpetrating another September 11th. Youth feel it, and so do the aged. Blame's tentacles grope ever wider, always after more victims.

And all the while, it makes us worse off. The response of falling back into self-defense and fear provides an illusion of safety, of security, of keeping the bad at bay, while in reality there is none of that. As Eve and Adam find, excuses and accusations simply aren't a helpful remedy. Indeed, systems of blame end up as spiraling snares that compound our guilt and make it harder to correct, to straighten it out and restore right, harder to say, "oops." Once you've demonized Ahmadinejad, you can't easily turn around and want to cooperate with Iran to

achieve a desirable end. Even though it will make things worse, we are trapped by past blame.

That is the same with our hyper-partisan politics, as we've had extra opportunity to notice, in constant adversarial language of opponents and "dropping the bomb" and declaring war and taking sides and, supposedly ultimately, of somehow claiming victory. Yet when the whole system is built on blame, on how terrible and wrong the other side is, it will continue to obstruct any future movement, any positive development. It is only about heated confrontation and entrenched resistance, tearing itself apart.

We reach similar dead ends with those around us. We take offense. An argument devolves into never agreeing again. Once a stain becomes permanent, it is tough to start over. We withdraw our trust, remaining constantly at odds, filled with enmity. The relationship is destroyed.

The story from Genesis reminds us this is not primarily a problem related to gender equality or family conflict, nor just terrorists and political hostages, but originates in our relationship with God. The man went so far as to blame God for giving him the woman in the first place. That is the sorry extent of the blame game, when everybody has ended up a loser. The woman, this best relationship, this delightful partner that God created, this one who, when he first met her, made the man exclaim, "At last!" now instead has been rejected, turned away. The best gifts God gives instead become objects of mistrust and we hide under the false pretense that we are victims because of God's graciousness. It's the cruel irony that while we imagine we are defining and defending ourselves, we end up instead just rejecting and turning away from the goodness God was intending for us to begin with. In the trap of blaming and walling off and breaking down of relationships, we are in fact refusing to let God be God, refusing to accept God's goodness.

This is what Jesus is talking about today, and what he has come to change, a mission of overcoming the Satan. By definition, Satan is the Accuser. In Hebrew it means the Accusing One. This satanic work isn't the villainous arch-nemesis of God, not some snakey, sly devil figure as the ultimate embodiment of evil. Rather, Satan is the blaming and accusing that turns us against each other and away from trusting God's goodness.

As our Gospel reading begins today, some people are trying, not surprisingly, to draw Jesus into the blame game, in to this constant rivalry of disagreements, of always noticing differences and accusing new opponents. Even his family bought into the accusations. People were calling Jesus Beelzebul, which is name-calling at its sharpest. Beelzebul means "Lord of Dung." The closely related Baalzebub is "Lord of the Flies." It's an Old Testament name to mock foreign idols, by saying, "That so-called god you're devoted to is only master over a pile of stink, and you followers are like flies on that stink." It is, of course, ironic that when they try to dump this stinky name on Jesus they are not only condemning God's work of renewing life, but it is they themselves who come out not smelling so rosy.

For his part, Jesus won't play that game. He points out that the whole structure of society, this system of blame and name-calling and boundaries to keep away outsiders, this entire structure of fear masquerading as security, is bound to collapse. "How can Satan drive out Satan?" he asks. Accusations only lead to more accusations, blame to further blame. There is no end to it. The whole house, divided against itself, won't be able to stand.

But Jesus hasn't just come to talk about that obvious truth. He doesn't just tell you to stop blaming, to take some individual responsibility, to talk nice and be civil, or even to try a little harder to appreciate the gift of God's goodness. It says he was casting out the demons. You don't need a mysterious, magical view for that. We try to demonize each other; Jesus stops that. These so-called monsters we keep

trying to push away, he restores into relationships as actual humans, even brothers and sisters.

More, Jesus says he's like a sneaky little thief who breaks into that house of divisions and he reclaims what that strong man has laid claim to, reclaims the goodness of life. And Jesus does this by undermining the power of the blame. He takes on the burden of the accusation so that Adam and Eve are not guilty. Nor are you guilty. Neither are those you're constantly trying to pick fights with. Jesus, the sneaky little thief, took all that guilt and died with it, as a criminal among thieves. As Psalm 69 says, in words that describe what Jesus does, "the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." He has taken the burden of your blame, and it died with him.

There is no sense in accusing or name-calling anymore, because it is just trying to insult a dead man who can take no offense. Blame is dead. There is no sting left to it. The power that the strong man had, the ensnaring force of these accusations, has been rendered impotent, worthless. Jesus stole it away and was buried with it. This divisive weapon of the Satan, the strength of accusations, is done. And from that dead pile of dung, surrounded by flies, out of that Jesus rose to refresh, to renew, to share the good gift of life. At last we get to God's response: God won't join the game of wielding blame against you, holding you to your faults; God simply declares you forgiven, freed of wrong, again to be right.

And now that is on the loose and moving forward. You're living in this kingdom of heaven that stands over against the crumbling, dead household of accusations. Instead of that ever increasing casting of blame, as 2nd Corinthians says, you are now part of spreading God's grace, extending it to more and more people. No longer part of the losing proposition of the blame game, you are part of this reconciliation game. Rather than pushing them further away, you can reach out to those who are different or offensive, the strangers and the outcasts. You

don't need to tally offenses, but may forgive insults because you have been brought again to see your identity and security doesn't rest in trying to be better than somebody else. No, you are assured your place in God's family, in this good household that is God's creation and your place in this family is guaranteed to be secure forever.