

“I Used to Think”

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June 6, 2021

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Genesis 8:3-15

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20

Mark 3:20-35

Long, long ago, Genesis tells us, a naked man and a naked woman hid in the bushes. They had been given the gift of knowledge after tasting the fruit that had been off-limits in the Garden of Eden. When they heard God, strolling through the garden at the time of the evening breeze, they were filled with shame. They thought that they needed to hide from God. They thought that they *could* hide from God. As it turns out, they were wrong.

The people of Israel used to think that if only they could have a king, they could rise up against their enemies, secure what they believed to be their promised land, and glorify in all they did. As it turns out, they were wrong. The prophet Samuel tried to warn them, but they sure wanted their king. But with their reliance on kingship replacing their reliance on God, they moved from being the underdogs-- you will notice in the bible that God and Jesus have a real soft spot for the underdogs of any story-- to a rise in dominance that fooled them into thinking they did not need God. And anytime that happened, trouble followed.

Those watching Jesus used to think that anyone with the power to cast out demons must be the king of demons himself, Beelzabul. As it turns out, they were wrong. Already Jesus had done some of his own self-care. When the crowds became too thick in the verses before, he asked the disciples to get a boat so that the crowds wouldn't crush him. He then went up to the mountain and asked the disciples to do the holy work he had been doing-- to heal, and cast out demons, perhaps realizing that he could not do it all by himself. When they returned to the crowds, however, the crowds were again so thick that they couldn't even eat.

It used to be that to be seen as a good worker, you take whatever abuse gets thrown at you, even when it threatens your well being, even when it threatens your soul. However, last week tennis player Naomi Osaka opted out of the media events during the French Open. When officials tried to fine her and threatened her with expulsion and further sanctions, she decided protecting herself from bouts of anxiety and depression that get triggered by the pressures of media attention was more important. She pulled out of the whole tournament. I wonder how many people were moved by her “Nope” to stand up for their mental, physical, and spiritual health in the workplace. We once thought that wasn't possible. But, as it turns out, we were wrong.

One thing I really love about the Bible is that people get it wrong all the time. I find that rather comforting. They think what they are doing will be pleasing to God. They think they know the mind of God. But then, they totally miss the mark. I am not sure what it says about me that I

find such satisfaction in Bible characters getting it wrong. But knowing that these ancestors of our faith did not always have it right about God creates a little space for grace for when I screw up in my approach to God. Their stories are our stories, and where they have failed, we have learned.

We have learned from Adam and Eve in Genesis that you can't hide from God. But too many people read this story and focus on some idea of original sin. I suspect that something they are missing is that God calls out to them, *Where are you?*, God is not actually unable to find them. Instead, God is asking, "where *are* you in this relationship with me, your creator? Where are we in this relationship?" I hear in God's question a longing for connection, a desire for closeness, from which Adam and Eve hide because they are ashamed.

When I asked people of our congregation what they used to believe about God, many people responded that they saw God as someone outside, and sternly judging them, so transcendent that God could not possibly be among us, wanting to share something as simple as the joy of an evening breeze with us.

Countless Christians have observed their loved ones or even themselves struggling with mental illness. Some of these mental illnesses have been belittled, and those suffering have been told that if they pray hard enough, and rely on God, their depression will go away. Their anxiety will go away. Their addiction will go away. Their delusions will go away. As it turns out, what was told to them is wrong; God can certainly be part of healing, but often it comes in the support of a therapist, and if necessary, the assistance of medication to help with more serious needs for mental health.

I used to think as a teenager, when I had a hopeless crush on another girl in my class, that these were the feelings I would just grow out of. I guess I had it easier than another one from our church, who used to think that she would go to hell for being a lesbian, even though she still had a deep love for Jesus. But she came to our church one day, and she found a different story.

Suzanne Junod-- one of our long distance worship participants-- says she used to think that the Holy Ghost would sneak up upon her whenever she needed reassurance... but the way she described it didn't sound very reassuring!

Joyce used to believe that only her little denomination-- the Plymouth Brethren-- and, maybe the Baptists, would go to heaven. I'm glad her mind changed because she's made a great member of the Presbyterian Church!

John Robinson, a pastor from many years ago who wanted to reform the Church of England from its vestiges of Catholicism, and eventually became pastor to the Puritan movement that settled these lands through the Mayflower, once said: I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw. Whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they

(Lutherans) will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented.

The sermon lasted 'a good part of the day'.<sup>1</sup>

While the faith we have today owes some credit to the religious reformers who came to these lands, we must also be responsible for the truth that those very reformers came here not only to practice their religion freely; they also stole land from the indigeneous people who already lived here. Like Adam, like Eve, we may want to hide from these truths, or shift blame to someone else. In my home state of Georgia, as well as many places across the country, they are forbidding schools from teaching critical race theory to their students. In other words, they reject the truth about the harms of slavery and its lasting repercussions; they sanitize the brutality that was shown to first nations that lived here; and instead they promote a mythology of America that just isn't honest. With these unresolved histories, we are far from the Eden our religious ancestors may have wanted to create in this new world.

But even knowing that we may get it absolutely wrong does not negate the possibility that God may have even more truth to show us. There is a saying within our branch of Christianity: "Once Reformed, Always Reforming." I think that is because God is still speaking to us and the church. If we are humble enough to listen and not insist on our own way... if we are responsible enough to stand accountable before God and those we have harmed, even when we mess up... if we are open enough to God finding us in love rather than finding substitutes which will always disappoint... then we might be blessed with a glimpse at mystery. We might share the joy of a walk with God in the evening breeze. We might discover Jesus himself showing up in surprising places.

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<sup>1</sup> Tomkins, Stephen (2020). *The Journey to the Mayflower: God's outlaws in the underground church*. New York: Pegasus Books. pp. 252–4