

After Eden –
thoughts on Eve, the fruit, bread & wine...

for Galma



Writing this sermon was an adventure and a challenge.
And before the writing there was a desire, or a need, a deep inner need to think something new.
So today's thoughts are all about the beginning and all about new beginnings.

God speaks, and God makes.
That is how the first two stories in the Old Testament talk of our beginnings.
Words and dust.
And there, a chapter later, comes Eve – and the fruit.

Eve, the first woman, reaches out a hand, takes and tastes and steps into a story of her own.
She chooses the complicated way.
Her reaching, her taking, her tasting will move her away from the safety of Eden.
From now on she has to make choices and decisions, each step of the way.

Forget all that you've ever heard or read about Eve and Adam, the fruit and the garden. And try to find in this old text something mysteriously new...

In my mind's eye I keep seeing Eve's gesture of reaching for the tree, fingers not yet grasping the fruit, but tempted and attracted... drawn ever nearer.
And I wonder: what hunger leads to this? What told Eve that Eden wasn't enough? ...that the landscape and life she knew would not suffice? What made her desire more? Search for the new and different?
What hunger lay beneath her hunger?

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” Gen 3:6

Eve is the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits – the true human being and creature of God.

What makes us human is that we stretch beyond what we know, to search for what lies beyond our own boundaries. Eve’s reaching for the fruit is the first quest... and only the beginning of following generations’ restless searching for more...

In her desire Eve takes the risk. And she discovers that you cannot stretch beyond the traditional and yet cling to what you have always known. Reaching out for what is new, what seems better and promising, means abandoning the familiar... means leaving behind the land in which we’ve lived our days.

For some this means physically departing; for others it means shifting patterns and habits.

And once you have started, once you are on the way, once you have had a bite of the fruit, you cannot undo or unlearn. It changes you forever.

The road into the land with the “fruits good for food” is never the same as the roads you’d taken before you’d come to the tree. And from the land of the new fruits there is hardly a way back into the old and familiar...

Even though some ancient Jewish stories tell us that Eve managed to make the tree grow branches that reached into both worlds – the old and the new, for Eve it is impossible to return. Other stories tell us that Eve took the tree with her and planted it outside Eden... Both types of stories try to connect the past with the present and the future.

Nevertheless: every departure opens up to us a strange land, a new world that is worth to be exploring.

Each time we cross a threshold or make a choice for something new, every time we reach for some piece of knowledge to make it our own, there is the presence of Eve in the shadows: this sister reaching out, tasting and growing beyond the limits of a world that was not enough... or not good enough.

Eve’s longings lead her far – toward places where she hopefully meets the living God, because: there is a life and there is a home outside Eden!

The story of Eve has over the centuries been used to warn people against following their wishes, desires and dreams. It has been used to make us believe that it is dangerous to pursue what we want... and that God often wants the opposite of what we do.

But this is not true. It is an enormous misunderstanding of God, of Eve, and of her story.

Eve’s hunger for more is as much part of God’s creation as everything else. So is Eve’s ability to choose and to decide... Eve can use it in concordance with the God who made her – and so can we.

We will throughout our lives, move from tree to tree, and from fruit to fruit, and some taste sweet, and some taste bitter, but they all hopefully draw us closer to where God wants us to be and to what God needs us to do.

One thing that God surely wants of us is that we share... that we don't only follow our own hunger and still it, but that we take the fruit, eat from it and share its sweetness with those around us. Just as Eve did.

Let us once and for all stop blaming Eve for sharing the fruit with Adam! Let us understand that God's will and longing for our lives never serves only ourselves but all those who we live with and care for.

One of the great old men of theology, Frederick Buechner, writes: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

This let's us gladly assume that Eve – by reaching out for the fruit and eating it – did not only still her own hunger but the hunger of generations to come. She became the mother of all who want to be responsible and free, who walk the complicated way and make their choices gladly.

It was never possible for Eve to re-enter Eden, but ever since there have always been trees planted that bear the fruits of knowledge and wisdom and life. Eve's action brought forth new worlds – nothing more and nothing less, and thus it is a creation story.

Whatever happened there in the garden, whatever cracked open there, why on earth this first woman chose to go a new way, we don't know. But the longer I wonder, the more my view is lead away from the taking of the fruit to the hiding after having had a bite of it.

Eve tasted, and Adam tasted, and with the tasting came the knowing.

"Then the eyes of both were opened", Genesis tells us.

They were exposed.

When they heard the voice of God in the evening breeze, Eve and Adam hid themselves. From the one who had formed them, from the one who'd given them life, they fled.

And I think, this is where the sin truly lies: that they hid their faces, that they refused to look upon the one who'd created them, that they distanced themselves from the living God, that they didn't admit openly to what they'd done, stood up for it & lived with the consequences of it.

They could have said: "Here we are..." "Yes, we have eaten the fruit...", "It was delicious!", "Yes, eating it has changed us, so let us now live as changed people..." Or: "Yes, God, we did it. We couldn't help it. We ate it, we shared it. There was no other way. We had to do it. We just had to try..."

And God, who'd already been looking for them in the garden, would probably have smiled at them and said: "I know!"

"I knew this would come. It was to be expected. Now live and eat the new food and face your new life."

The failure of Eve and Adam was that they couldn't stand upright in the presence of God, that they didn't or couldn't take responsibility for what they'd done.

Human beings seem to have this impulse... the desire to hide, hold back, run away when we are asked to stand and look a challenge in the eye.

Eve's story teaches us not to hide, but to "un-hide" ourselves, to turn round to God, look her or him in the face – and live with all the terror and wonder this world holds in store for us.

It invites us to ask "What do we use our courage for?"

Taking the fruit was a daring act. It changed everything.

But what if Eve had been equally daring in refusing to hide herself? What if, when she and her husband heard the voice of God calling to them in the cool evening, she had stepped out and stood up and said "Here I am!"?

Today's Eves leave their own gardens.

Not the innocence of Eden, but the terror of Sudan, the injustice of Libya, the war in Iraq, the terror of Kabul, the poverty and corruption of Lagos, the hopelessness of Nairobi. Today's Eves step out of the exploitation, the injustice, the male dominance, the cruel anti-women traditions and patterns all over the world. Today's Eves turn their backs to patriarchal thinking, to brainwashing that makes the world believe that men are better, more important, more significant and more worthy than women.

Today's Eves deny oppression, humiliation and violence. They fight for freedom for themselves and their daughters and sons. They oppose female circumcision. They help each other and stand up together to abolish rape and brutality from their families and societies.

Today's Eves long for fruits like freedom, justice, education and empowerment of women. They long for bread and books. They hope for change, and dream of the fullness of life.

Today's Eves long for the same chances, jobs and salaries as men have. They do it not only in Mexico City or Freetown, they also lack the last bits of equality and equal rights in every single country of the globe.

Today's Eves know the fruitlessness of the refugee boats and the hunger for life in the asylum seekers' camps.

And they gladly take the risk and eat the fruits of new lands.

Some taste sweet, and some taste bitter.

Reaching out to freedom and stepping into our own story means choosing the hard way. ...means giving up the familiarity of the old and having to make choices at each step of the way. Some of our decisions are right, and some are – not wrong – but unfortunate.

Sometimes we have to take detours, overcome obstacles and walk paths stonier than we could have imagined. Sometimes our tears water the wayside of the road into freedom and self-responsibility. But once set off, we cannot go back.

We once and for all have to live and cope with the bittersweet taste of a fruit that promised us a new life beyond all boundaries. And at times we are the happiest people in this world, and at other times we are as unhappy and lonely as one can be.

But – like Eve – let us stand up to it, look our God in the face, tell her “Here I am”, and ask her to be with us and walk by our side on our journey through a self-determined adult life with its dark and its light sides.

And like Eve says in a modern poem let us speak with her the beautiful words:
the day I left Eden
I decided not to die
but to choose instead
to sink my roots in the soil
of this terrible, stunning world.

Eve and Adam found out that their eating exposed them, said something about who they were and what they desired...

Jesus knew that, too.

He knew the importance of reaching out, tasting and eating.

He spent much time at the tables of all sorts of people: poor tables, rich tables, feast tables... community tables.

Jesus understood the eating at the table, the sharing in community as a revelation.

When he sat down with his companions on the road to Emmaus, he took the bread, he blessed it and gave it to them. And with words that offer an echo of Eden we are told: ***“Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”***
Luke 24: 31

At the communion table we are all asked to reach out, taste and see, unhide, share and stand up to our God as changed people. Just as we often pray here at Peace Church:

In gratitude, in deep gratitude for this moment, this meal, these people we give ourselves to you.

Take us out to live as changed people

because we have shared the living bread and cannot remain the same.

Ask much of us, expect much from us,

enable much by us, encourage many through us.

So, Lord, may we live to your glory,

both as inhabitants of earth and citizens of heaven.

With Eve, and with the friends of Jesus at all times, let us perceive the sweetness of this world, and its beauty. Let us embrace the wounds and the pain. And let us see the earth and its people with grown-up eyes and offer others the feeding that we have found.

Amen.