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Texts: Genesis 3: 1-7, 13; Skywoman Falling: An Indigenous Creation Myth

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Original Blessings and Original Sins:
Lessons from Different Creation Stories

Here's a strange little something that happened to me not too long ago. I was running on the trail system at the end of Library Lane. It was a cool morning, and the skies were gray. I had just crested a small hill and was descending the opposite side when, out of nowhere, the head of a fish dropped into the path a step or two in front of me. I was startled. I stopped to inspect it, surprised at what I was seeing. How does the head of a fish drop from the sky in the middle of a forest? Surely, I reasoned, it had been dropped there by a bird, finishing a meal it had carried from the Long Island Sound. I looked up, but the air was still. I could see nothing - no trace of a nest in the trees above. For just a moment, I imagined that a portal had opened in the clouds, and that a mysterious hand had dropped the fish head at my feet as an omen of something important. Were I a character in Homer, or Melville, the scene would have represented some awful portent. Nevertheless, after a little bit I shook my head, shrugged, and kept on running.

In a way, that story, and my response to it, represents two different ways of approaching the world, both of them right in certain ways, and both of them limited. In one, my mind searched for a rational explanation for a strange event, and I constructed a story that is, I'm sure, true. A bird went fishing, and it dropped the remains of its meal in mid-flight, a mile or two away from the sea. In the other, the fish head was a message that, if not delivered to me personally, was still somehow a message waiting to be interpreted. It could be read as an omen perhaps, or as a harbinger of things to come. But it might just as well be understood as a stray occurrence, serving as a reminder of the complex planetary ecosystem all around us, that I, for one, tend to take for granted as I puff along forest trails. It might be read not as a supernatural occurrence, but as a sign of wonder and awe just the same. Call the first story, the first way of making sense of that event, the way of Reason. Call the second story, the second way of making sense of that event, the way of Wonder.

I tend to think that my response to the fish head falling from the sky discloses a fundamental truth about who we are as human beings. Faced with an unexpected or surprising event, we require multiple ways of capturing that reality if we are to understand it. We need to be able to tell different kinds of stories about singular events, stories that accomplish different tasks, stories that reveal different truths about that moment. Take, for example, a cancer diagnosis. We need the descriptive language of biology, and of immunology, to understand what is happening inside of our bodies as cells divide and grow, and as medicine counteracts that growth. We need to tell a story based on empirical truths. Few people I know, however, are satisfied with that story alone when faced with such a diagnosis. Another kind of story is required, this one having to do with meaning. What does this event have to do not with biology, but with the meaning of my life? What does such an event disclose about who I am as a person, and what I value most? What does it reveal about who I wish to be, and how I intend to use my time? Or, to name another example, take the event of falling in love. One might plausibly tell a biological story about the activation of hormones and pheromones in an exchange between two people. That story would be true. Or we could tell a story about how certain longings or

deficiencies from one's childhood got stirred up in an exchange with another, leading to desire, and then to love. That story might also be true. But most people tend to require a different kind of story to narrate their own loves: stories about being overwhelmed by the beauty of another, the wit or charm of another, the pleasure of being in the company of that cherished person. Like a fish head falling from the sky, we need more than one story if we are to understand the most significant truths of our lives.

That's a dynamic that's captured throughout the Bible. Stories about events are narrated not once, but twice, and sometimes as many as three or four times. The story of Jesus requires not just one telling but four. The story of the Hebrew people is narrated once, through the end of 2 Kings, and then it's told all over again, beginning in Chronicles. Moses receives the Ten Commandments on Sinai not once, but twice, first in Exodus, and later in Deuteronomy, when the story is repeated with a difference. And of course the same holds true of the creation stories in the book of Genesis. Creation is narrated once, and then the story is told all over again, using entirely different elements.

This morning I want to run with that biblical insight - that we require multiple perspectives if we are to understand the complexity of any event - and apply it to two differing stories about the origins of the world. One is Biblical. The other is Indigenous. Both are examples of that category of storytelling that I have called the Way of Wonder, or Awe. One depicts what came to be known as original sin. The other depicts what can be thought of as an original blessing. Both are stories about women. Both are stories about a fall. Neither purports to be scientific. But they represent how an accent can fall in different ways across different traditions, such that different realities come into focus. And so in a spirit of pluralism, and in a spirit of partnership, one growing out of our service last week with our Nehantic friends, and of our recent Land Acknowledgement), I wish to argue that we need both of these stories if we are to live responsibly and with care upon the Earth. I wish to argue that two ways of telling a story can be true.

You've now heard them both. The first is familiar. It's the story of Eve's temptation by the serpent. She eats the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, fruit that she has been enjoined by God not to eat. She then gives the fruit to Adam, and he too tastes it. Later in the passage, that act leads God to curse the serpent, and then to condemn Eve and Adam to a life of hardship and toil upon the Earth. They fall, in other words, from innocence and grace into a world of complexity, competition, and sometimes, pain. It's a powerful story, one that has, sometimes, been used to positive effect to explain the alienation we do experience, while at other times it has produced enmity and strife - between men and women, between humans and animals, and between humans and plants.

The second story is gentler. It too is ancient, passed down among Indigenous people in what is now the Midwest of the United States. Like the story of Eve, it too concerns a fall, but in this story the landing is softer. An opening in the heavens appears, and mysteriously, a woman tumbles through it. She falls to the Earth, but not before she has grabbed a sacred bundle of seeds from the paradise she is leaving. Geese ascend from the waters below to break her fall, and so the Skywoman lands in a bed of feathers. Other animals gather and offer gifts, the most important of which is the turtle, who offers his back upon which to stand. The turtle's curved shell grows, until it becomes the curvature of the earth itself. Then, in a gesture of gratitude for all the animals have done, the Skywoman reaches into her sacred bundle, and scatters seeds upon the surface of the earth. They grow into fruits and vegetables and places of shelter, which come

to nourish both human and animal life. From that time on, according to the story, animals come to visit the Skywoman, in order to receive her hospitality and her sacred gifts of life.

That story forms the core of Robin Wall Kimmerer's extraordinary book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, a book that I know more than a few of you have read. If you haven't, it's worth your time. Kimmerer is both a biologist working in a university setting and a member of the Potawatomi People. She has a unique ability to keep different perspectives, different stories, in play at one and the same time - in this case science (the way of Reason) and Indigenous wisdom (the way of Wonder and Awe). But she also has a way of unpacking the assumptions buried within our cosmologies - those stories we tell about the origins of the cosmos. Regarding the two stories we are considering this morning, she writes, "One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a co-creator of the good green world that would be home to her descendents. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world..." She then imagines the two women meeting. The Skywoman says to Eve, "Sister, you got the short end of the stick."

It's true. Eve did get the short end of the stick. It may well be that we are all suffering the ecological consequences of internalizing that story, with its assumption of enmity between humans and the natural world rather than a generous reciprocity. Even so, I wonder what would happen if we could keep Robin Wall Kimmerer's imagined conversation going between Eve and the Skywoman, and between their respective descendents. In the same way that Kimmerer is capable of reconciling science and Indigenous wisdom, might we reconcile Indigenous and Hebraic forms of wisdom regarding the natural world? What might these two women say to one another, and what might we learn from the conversation?

I imagine them together on the shore of a great body of water. The Skywoman has known of Eve, for the reputation of the latter has spread far. Eve, on the other hand, has but recently come to know about the Skywoman. Even so, they trust one another. Both women somehow recognize themselves in the other. It is the Skywoman who speaks first. Tell me, she says, what you have gone through. Tell me what you have endured. She is surprised when Eve tells her that despite the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit, that she has no regrets about doing so. Mine is actually a story of growth, Eve says. She continues: Mine is a story of intellectual awakening, of sexual awakening, a story of what it means to progress from naivete to awareness, from innocence to responsibility, from minority to maturity. Mine is the story of every child who acquires language, and in so doing imperceptibly says goodbye to a pre-linguistic realm, of somehow being at one with the world. So too, Eve continues, mine is the story of what it means to be at home within a world that is both good and confining at one and the same time. Mine is the story of what it is to be forced to leave that world in search of experience. She keeps speaking: mine is the story of the artist, driven to create beyond the bounds of what has already been done. Mine is the story of the singer, working on a song that hasn't already been sung. Mine is the story of what it is to realize that paradise is a trap, and that it was only east of Eden where something called life could be found.

Eve pauses, and then the Skywoman says, "You have suffered much for your refusal of the terms of paradise. You have been misunderstood, blamed, excoriated, shunned, and humiliated for your insistence. Yours has been a life of forced labor and constant movement. Above all," the Skywoman says, "yours has been a life of loneliness and isolation, for your great need has cut you off from your fellow creatures. You have had to bear much sorrow."

At these words Eve nods, and she weeps, for the Skywoman has understood truly. And then Eve says, "And you...tell me of your sojourn." Here the Skywoman is silent. When she

speaks, her words are thus: “Mine is a story of kinship, of seeking to be in relation with all living things. Mine is the story of seeking not to possess, but to give. Mine is the story of every person who comes to discover their best self in the company of others, who has ever felt the ecstasy of the wind, of the rain, of the sun, and been gladdened to the core. Mine is the story of those who sense their dependence upon the soil and its many gifts, and who give thanks for the sustenance of the earth. Mine is the story of those who listen for the voices of the ancestors. Mine is the story of those who choose to stay, who remain rooted to a place, to a people, to a tradition. Mine is the story of those who have sensed their limits, and have not cursed them, but have blessed them instead. Mine is the story of trusting in the inherent generosity of the land, and the animals, and praising it all for the wonder that it is.

Here the Skywoman pauses. And then Eve says, “You too have suffered. For many have taken from you without giving thanks. Many have consumed your fruits, your bounty, without due reverence. Many have mistaken your generosity for simplicity, and they have stolen, and robbed, and pillaged your fields. Yours too has been a story of misunderstanding and isolation, for much of the world could not understand that you give and receive freely. You too have had to bear much sorrow, for your children too have been hunted, and persecuted, and killed for following a different way.”

Eve breaks off. The Skywoman bows her head, and now she too weeps, for Eve has spoken truly. They sit for a long time in silence, for they recognize in one another a common struggle, a common spirit, despite their outward differences. And they recognize a need for one another, that they might heal the wounds that each of them bears.

That’s when the Skywoman reaches into the sacred bundle that she still carries with her. And she hands Eve a piece of fruit, assuring her that she need not feel the animosity of the earth, and of all creation, for risking what she did. “Eat of this and be healed,” the Skywoman says. “You need not be at war with yourself anymore, nor do your children need to make war upon the planet anymore. Taste, eat, for it is all of it good. Very good.” And Eve receives the gift, and she eats.

Eve too carries a bundle. When she has finished eating, she reaches inside, and she removes several stalks of grass that she has collected during her long wandering upon the earth. It is sweetgrass, a plant native to the Skywoman and her people. Eve begins to weave the strands together, and she tells the Skywoman: “May these woven strands represent what we have shared today. May they tell of the ways we are allied together, of the ways we journey and grow together, of the ways we may yet come to cherish and support one another. May these strands be a sign of renewed fellowship, of a sacred interdependence, of a rift that is healed one braided knot at a time.” The Skywoman receives the gift, and she too weaves some strands together.

When their meeting is over, they go their separate ways, but vow to return to those shores often, to visit with one another, to learn from one another, to be restored by the presence of the other. And in so meeting, they have learned to regard the world from the vantage of the other. They have come to understand their need of one another if they are to tell their stories well. They understand the importance of gazing upon the world with a kind of sacred double vision.

And so it may be for us. We too have become acutely conscious of the ways living upon the earth, and caring for it, may require us to inhabit multiple stories, and not a single one. We too have become aware of the need to be braided together with those who inhabit the world in ways not quite our own, and yet also not far from our own. And we too have become conscious of the ways the story we have traced, while not wholly wrong, has led to some unintended consequences. What would it mean for us to cease to live within the curse handed down to Eve,

to Adam, and to the serpent? What would it mean to live outside that structure of prohibition and guilt so hardwired into our cultural DNA? What would it mean to trust our own inner needs and instincts, without the fear of a punitive God, or those who would act in that God's stead? And what if we could sense the deep and healing gifts of community, and kinship, that our Indigenous friends offer whenever we are together? What if we were healed not by adherence to one story alone, but to several?

A story, like a sermon, is something like the head of a fish dropped at the feet of those making their way upon a forest path. In that, it's like the world itself, what we call the creation - it is simply given, landing before us as a gift, as a mystery. What are we to make of such things? How are we to understand them?

Perhaps we are at our best when we pause for a while, letting our minds work. Then we tell a story, and then another after that, and another still. In such a way, something like reverence opens within us, and maybe something like shared understanding. Maybe even something like communion. Amen.