

*Stark Naked*  
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-21  
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After Charlie's bath, after his slender, pink little 3-year-old body was toweled off, I would blow my trumpet, "Tut-da-dee-dut dee-da" and announce to the empty bathroom and bedrooms beyond – sometimes also empty, sometimes with the barking dog, Maestro, in attendance, "Presenting King Charlie, Tut-dee-da-dut dee da!" Little Charlie with every part of his little body clearly showing, arms (and other part) swinging, would march with high steps out of the bathroom and down the hall to his bedroom. At three he neither knew nor cared that he was naked, exposed, and showing what we would call 'private.'

Little kids often revel in their nakedness. Some of you may have had a child who pulled his or her clothes off simply because they were binding. Little kids love the free and loose feeling of nakedness. That love is not complicated by social strictures or propriety or body image issues.

At about the age of 18 months little Sally was in the habit of lifting her shirt – for no particular reason, it seemed. One day when Sally lifted her shirt, in mock scolding her chuckling mom said, "Sally, where is your modesty?" After that we older kids took great pleasure in asking Sally where her modesty was – Sally's response to that question was to instantly lift her shirt. At least for a time, the little one seemed to think that her modesty was a body part under her shirt. Little children have no concept of nakedness – no need for concepts like modesty. Their bodies are good and pretty and pleasurable – to be enjoyed and exhibited with abandon.

Our text on this first Sunday in Lent is the Garden of Eden story from the book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. The story is familiar. It has been depicted in art work for centuries, told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted until much of the meaning is lost. It is one of the few Bible stories which are familiar even to non-believers in our secular culture. This story, a part of the ancient Israelite creation myth, tries to address the question of why there is evil in the world. Yet, although many things have been read into the story there are difficulties in interpretation. For those Christians who say that Adam and Eve were in a perfect state before this scene there is the question of how or why someone who is a perfect human could or would sin at all. There are also questions about where the identified evil came from, if the world was in a perfect, idyllic state. Some say that the snake is the devil, yet the Old Testament actually never makes that connection. In the Bible the serpent is only one of God's creatures, created by God, and described as "crafty." Appallingly, some have used this story to say that women are inferior by implying that Eve sinned first and somehow seduced poor, innocent Adam. That's bunk – and also not in the text. The Hebrew language implies that both were present the whole time Eve was talking with the snake. Not only that – according to the story, God actually gave the original command about the tree to Adam, not to Eve.

What we do know is that the story says that God set the first humans in an abundant garden. God gave them more than enough to sustain them, but God also placed upon them the responsibility of sustaining the garden. They were to work and cultivate it, to take care of this creation. Then God set a prohibition, a limit within which these human creatures were to live. They had considerable freedom. Their idyllic state included a bit of work, not simply idleness. They also had boundaries, which they were not to transgress. The text tells us that at the point when God set the rules Adam and Eve were naked and they were not ashamed. Then they crossed God's boundary. They ate the fruit – the language is general – a piece of fruit, not specifically an apple. Tradition likely identified that fruit as an apple because of artists' renderings of what the Hebrew calls "a piece of fruit." Crossing God's boundary, doing the one thing God told them not to do, changed everything. One scholar describes that piece of fruit as 'a mind altering drug.' According to the story, that one piece of fruit forever changed how human beings see the world. There was no going back. Those who had known only innocence, those to whom nakedness was simply a natural, free, comfortable state, now saw their world in measures of good and evil. They knew shame where they had known no shame before.

Little kids have a brief period of innocence, a period when they do not know about good and evil. A small child lives in an innocent world of 'whatever works' where moral dilemmas do not exist. Little Charlie literally was naked, but was not ashamed because he had no concept of good and evil, no understanding of nakedness other than as something that felt good.

Shortly after Easter when my niece Bridget was almost three years old, my sister-in-law found her sitting on the dining room floor one day. Bridget had chocolate on her mouth, on her shirt, and on her hands. Empty candy papers were scattered on the floor around her. Bridget's mom said to her, "Bridget Claire, you know you are not allowed to eat chocolate without asking." Without missing a beat, Bridget looked her mother straight in the eye and said, "Oh, Mom, I opened all these papers and there wasn't any chocolate in any of them." It was clearly a bold faced lie. Bridget was metaphorically naked, but did not know enough to be ashamed. Although three-year-olds are learning about right and wrong, they still are innocent enough to be unfazed about lying openly and expecting their deception to be accepted at face value.

Except for the true sociopath, adults are not nearly as good liars because we know good and evil. We know that we are exposed as liars when we lie. We have lost our innocence. We are all sinners. We all feel naked, vulnerable, and exposed in our sins. Sin is a mind altering experience. When we sin, we lose our carefreeness. When we sin we have something to guard. When we lie, which is one of the most common sins, we suddenly have something we must remember. We must keep straight what we said at a time when the truth seemed unpalatable. We must try to cover our lie, which sometimes leads to more lying. Just tell someone that you are busy instead of admitting that you don't want to go to lunch with them. Then run into them only

to have them ask what you were so busy doing on Thursday. Then you have to add another lie to fill in the blank. If you're not quick you may forget that you lied and admit that you were at home doing nothing. The kind of tangled webs we weave with such seemingly innocent sin is the stuff of sitcoms and soap operas, but can also cause true hurt and damage relationships. Whatever the sin, every time we sin, we complicate our lives, cause ourselves distress, and alienate ourselves from others and from God.

When we feel vulnerable and naked because of sin, we lose our ability to focus on others. Guarding ourselves becomes our primary concern. As decent people we are ashamed of the things we do, of the ways that we cheat whether we betray a friendship by lying or a co-worker or neighbor by gossiping about their vulnerabilities or a spouse by some degree of unfaithfulness whether a sexual dalliance or verbal betrayal. When we are ashamed of ourselves, of our words or our actions, protecting ourselves becomes our focus. We turn inward instead of outward. Love of neighbor falls to the way-side as we move to cover our own nakedness.

The bad news is that while we may be able to hide our nakedness from other people, we can never hide our nakedness from God. Sometimes I think we forget, or at least hide from ourselves, the fact that God misses nothing. Even though we have ways of convincing ourselves that our missteps really are insignificant little sins, God sees. God does not have a category called "little white lie." God does not see sins based upon a rating system. That is a human technique. By establishing a hierarchy of sin in our own minds, we manage to sin and still feel superior to those other sinners whose sins we consider "worse." Recall what happened when the horrible story of Abu Greb broke. We all felt terrible about the pictures of torture and abuse perpetrated by some of our own. But then when some terrorist group beheaded their captives there was a palpable sigh of relief in this country. Our folks, we told ourselves, only did something stupid, but those others are evil. In reality they were all evil – ours and theirs.

We can't be superior in the fact of our sin by rating our sins as somehow less offensive to God. Before God all sin is ugly. Scripture tells us that God reads the mind and heart. Although we are all dressed in some version of our Sunday best here today or at least have slipped into our more presentable selves, we are actually right now a pathetic bunch sitting (or in my case standing) here before Almighty God stark naked, exposed, with all our ugly little sins. We are naked with our sins hanging out just as much as our paunch, cellulite, wrinkles, and warts would be if we literally stripped off our garments. There is no hiding anything from God. We are all naked!

That is the bad news – and that is the very good news, sisters and brothers. We are all naked before God and that is very good news. We have been using nakedness in its negative, threatening meanings having to do with being exposed, found out, and vulnerable, but of course there is a positive way for us to think about nakedness, too. Nakedness is about intimacy in the

most wonderful and personal sense. On the most literal level, of course, such nakedness is about sexual intimacy with our beloved. But nakedness as positive vulnerability also happens on an emotional level. Framed in a caring, trusting relationship whether a marriage or a friendship, such emotional nakedness can be a wonderful experience. We all need such relationships, people with whom we can be vulnerable, with whom we can be our naked, needy, selves; people with whom we can be brutally honest about our wishes, needs, wants, dreams, hopes, fears, disappointments, and failures. We all need people who will hold our vulnerability as a sacred trust never mocking it – always preserving it as a holy gift.

The good news is that the very God who sees all of our sin, the God from whom we cannot hide our naked failure and disobedience, calls us into intimate, safe relationship. Notice what happens in the text we read today. Although initially the story quotes God as saying that Adam will die if he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ultimately Adam and Eve do not die. They crossed God's boundary. There are consequences. They are put out of God's garden. Their breaking of God's command is punished, but notice what else God does. God makes them garments and clothes them. The fig leaves that Adam and Eve used to cover their own nakedness were inadequate. They could not hide from God. They were still exposed. But God covered their nakedness. It is one of the most tender and caring scenes in all of scripture. God's children have directly disobeyed God's command and yet God responds by making garments to cover their newly discovered nakedness.

God who is portrayed in the story as threatening annihilation instead offers life. God's response to sin is not death, but life. Later, in Jesus Christ, God said to human beings,

"Dear Humans:

'Yes!'

Love, God"

Jesus Christ is God's 'yes' to the world. Jesus Christ is God's affirmation that God chooses life for us despite our sinful disobedience. God's response to our sinful nakedness is the offer of grace and forgiveness.

While it is intimidating to realize that God is present and watching during even our most private sins, while it is unnerving to realize how very naked we all are before our God, we have nothing to fear. Although God sees, God asks us to own up to what we have done, to come clean, to admit our nakedness, to tell God the naked truth. God yearns for each of us, longs to be in intimate relationship with us, and calls us to make new resolve, to turn from our sin. God is waiting to wrap you in grace, to cover the nakedness of your sin, to cherish you, hold you, and comfort you. God chooses to respond to our death dealing with the offer of life. All we need to do is turn to God in gratitude.