The Promise to Eve
Genesis 3:1-15

When our girls were little, one of the things they loved to do was to put on plays for us… if we let them! Because when they did, they'd get all dressed up and totter around in Su's shoes, or my coat, but let's just say that it wasn't always easy to work out what the plot was.

So we'd say, 'yes, we'll come watch… but only if you promise it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And most definitely an end.'

Because that's the framework of any great story, isn't it. But if an author's writing an epic, sometimes they'll give you a Prequel as well. All the critical stuff that went on before the story even begins, that helps you understand what's going in the middle.

Because the middle of stories can get complicated can't they. And you're wondering, 'is he a goody or a baddy? Why did she do that, or not do that? Why are they responding the way they are?' And the Prequel helps you understand, 'Ah, that's why, that's what's going on.'

And today is the first Sunday of Advent, this period when as a church we reflect on the first coming of Jesus, in humility as a baby: the beginning of the great drama of the Gospel. But traditionally, Advent's also been a time to look forward to Jesus' Second Coming, when he will come again in glory, and the end of the story.

But if Advent gives us the Beginning and the End, what about the middle? Well, that's where you come in. Because the middle is the part you're caught up in. But as I've said, the middle of stories can get confusing. And if you're not yet a Christian you can be thinking 'what is this Christian faith about?' And if you are a Christian, you can be wondering, 'why is this happening to me? How does this, how do I fit into the story.'

Well, that's why this Advent we're going to look at the Prequel to Advent. We're going back in time to the centuries and millennia before Jesus was born, and to the promises God made to certain individuals, promises that help us understand - ah, that's what God's up to! That's what he's up to in Bethlehem, at the beginning and the first coming of Jesus, that's what he's up to in the middle, the bit where you have a part, and that's what he'll be up to at The End. Though, as CS Lewis puts it that end will really be a new beginning, 'Chapter One of *the Great Story*, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.'

And we're going to start today by looking at The Promise to Eve

The Oldest Trick in the Book

Now unlike other ancient creation accounts, the Bible doesn't begin with gods arising out of a primordial chaos, and fighting, or having sex, with each other. It begins with a sovereign God who speaks the Universe into being from nothing. And he does so through the beauty of binaries: heaven and earth, light and dark, day and night, sun and moon, land and sea, plants bearing seed and trees bearing fruit, fish and birds, earth and animals. But then comes the crowning beauty, the crowning binary of creation, as God says, '"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"… So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female he created them*' (Gen 1:26-27).

And God makes the first man, Adam, from the dust of the earth and places him in a garden, to tend it as his representative. And then he makes the woman from the man and gives her to him as his

helper in the work. And when Adam sees her, he bursts into the very first love song, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23).

But their happiness does not last long. An intruder enters the garden: Genesis 3:1, ‘Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast.’ Now if you watch a crime thriller, sometimes it can take time to work out the identity of the culprit. So, who is the serpent? Is he just a serpent, or more than a serpent?

Well, by the end of the Bible there’s no doubt, because in the book of Revelation his mask is removed and he is, ‘The great dragon… *that ancient serpent*, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world’ (Rev 12:9).

You see, in the Bible, evil is not an abstract concept, it’s real and personal. And if you go ‘o come on, you can’t really believe in a personal devil1’ I’d ask you to consider what makes more sense of what you see going on in the world, that deep down we’re all fundamentally good or that evil is very real, very personal and very deceptive.

And it does not take long for him to get down to business. Verse 1, ‘He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”’ And he begins to cast doubts on the goodness of God, and that to live within God’s bounds is not the best. And so when the woman replies that God had told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - because if they do they will die, the serpent replies, v4-5, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”

How do you think that sounded to Eve? Like the voice of evil? Or like the voice of freedom, and self-fulfilment and justice - because clearly God has been keeping from her what is rightly hers.

And as one commentator puts it, that offer to be like God, to take your life, your future, your identity, your morality, the person you want and choose to be, into your own hands, is ‘intoxicating’.

And it remains intoxicating, doesn’t it? You be you. Whatever makes you happy is what’s right. And don’t let anyone else tell you how you should live or who you should be.

But what Genesis 3 tells us is that that offer is the oldest lie in the book, because it tells you, you can be like God, and take all the weight of deciding life and meaning and identity and morality on yourself *and it will be great*. But the truth, then and now, is very different.

You see the serpent told them, ‘eat the fruit and your eyes will be opened’ and he was right. Their eyes *were* opened, but not to beauty and light, but to shame and guilt. And for the first time they experienced a profound alienation - from each other as they tried to cover up and hide themselves from the other, and from God, as they hid from him.

And in our own day, we too are told ‘define your own identity, decide your own morality, and it’ll be great!’ But look at the data on loneliness and feelings of worthlessness, on feeling dissatisfied with life or hopeless about the future, on depression and self-harm and medication use, and all the graphs are going up, some by staggering degrees.

Now, is that the case for everyone? No. But it's the case for enough, and the trends are clear enough that even the most hardened sceptic should stop and think: 'This is not working.' But Genesis would say, why does that surprise you? It's the oldest lie in the book. You cannot hope to carry the weight of being God and think it'll turn out fine.

Now, it would be nice to imagine that with his wife being deceived by a serpent, Adam would ride to Eve's rescue, like a hero. But sadly, v6, 'She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.' So the helper does not help, and the hero falls at the very first challenge.

And yet, a hero will come, and come from the woman.

The Promise Made

And having walked into the garden, God addresses the serpent, v15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

So strictly speaking, this is less of a promise to Eve and more of a threat, a judgment passed, a sentence to be executed on the serpent. That one day, from the woman whom the serpent had tried to enlist as an ally against God, would come One who would crush the serpent's head.

And that, says, Derek Kidner, an Old Testament scholar, is, 'the first glimmer of the gospel.' That out of the wreckage, out of the darkness, God would raise up a rescuer. And so it is a promise to Eve.

Now, in politics and the Press, conflicts are often framed as the battle between good and evil, and you'd better support the good lest evil triumph. The Bible gives a different message. Because the battle is not between equal and opposing forces where the outcome is somehow in doubt. There is no doubt about the outcome. The head of the serpent will be crushed.

And yet, it's going to be costly.

Firstly, v15 again, there will be 'enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman.' And right down to today history tells us how women and girls have suffered generally at the hands of evil.

But when it comes to the women who bear the line of the One who come and crush the serpent's head, that evil becomes specific. You see, when Matthew sits down to write his gospel, before he tells us anything of the events surrounding Jesus' birth, he gives us Jesus' genealogy, the long list of Jesus' male ancestors from Abraham to Joseph. And in that list of men, 4 names stand out, because they're women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. And each of those women suffered, whether that was sexual abuse, or the death of a loved one, or being treated as a racial outsider.

And if you'd interviewed them and they told you, 'I've experienced evil and suffering first hand', and you knew their stories, you would not disagree with them. They knew first hand the enmity of their mortal enemy.

And yet, from one generation to the next, the seed was passed down, and the promise was being kept. Because it wasn't just going to be costly for the women. Genesis 3:15 again, "I will put

enmity between…. your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, *and you shall bruise his heel*."

The Promise Kept

I used to work on a neonatal unit in an area with pockets of significant socio-economic deprivation. And our nurses were wonderful and feisty women. They had to be because they saw it all! But occasionally when the parents of a newborn baby were asked what they wanted to name him or her, the nurse in charge would go, 'No. You are not naming him that. Go away and come back with a sensible name.' And let's just say they had the kind of authority to get away with it.

But even to them names did not carry the weight they did in ancient Judea. Because having given us Jesus' genealogy Matthew tells us, 'Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place this way' (Matt 1:18). And he recounts how Joseph was on the verge of divorcing his pregnant fiancé, Mary, because he knew he was not the father of the child. Until an angel appeared told him in a dream, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, *and you shall call his name Jesus*" (Matt 1:20-21).

Now, in Romeo and Juliet, Juliet asks, "What's in a name?" And the answer she's looking for is 'nothing'. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet." In other words, it doesn't matter what surname Romeo carries and what family he comes from. What matters is that I love him.

But when it comes to Jesus, Matthew would answer, 'what's in a name? Everything!' Because the name Jesus means, 'the Lord saves'. Which is why the angel says, "you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins." (Matt 1:21). In other words, Joseph, he's the one who's going to be the rescuer, who's going to be the hero, who's going to crush the serpent's head.

Which is why the angel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33).

You see, every other king had fallen before evil. And the angel's saying, 'but not your son, Mary - his throne will never fall. Instead, evil, and the serpent, will fall before him.' In the words of the hymn, 'O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame, A second Adam to the fight, And to the rescue came!'

And so the promise to Eve tells you what's happening when the great story of Advent begins: the serpent slayer has been born, and born to a woman, the virgin Mary.

But, of course, the serpent has no intention of taking any of this lying down. King Herod hears of the birth of the true king and orders the massacre of every boy aged 2 years and under, in and around Bethlehem. The actions of a despot trying to stamp out any opposition? Sure. But something much darker as well - the attempt by the serpent to crush the Seed of the woman before it can crush him.

And when, after his baptism, Jesus begins his ministry the place he heads is the wilderness, because the garden has become a desert, and like Adam and Eve he too was tempted by Satan. Tempted to doubt God's word, to pursue his own ends and to worship the creature rather than the Creator. But where they failed, Jesus triumphed and his foot is poised above the serpent's head.

And the gospels tell us how, throughout his ministry, Jesus freed people from the power of darkness and delivered them from demonic oppression, leaving them, as the writers tell us, clothed and in their right minds. As Jesus said, "The thief [Satan, the serpent] comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I come that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

And yet, lingering in the background, hiding in the shadows, are those words, 'and you will bruise his heel.' Because the life Jesus offers will come at a cost. And the night comes when he experiences the evil of betrayal, by a close friend of all people, and when he's arrested in another garden, he says to those who take him: "This is your hour, *and the power of darkness*" (Luke 22:53). And at his trial the evil of injustice and physical brutality is turned upon him, and he's crucified on a Roman cross as a criminal, and it seems as though the serpent has won. That he's crushed the Seed of the Woman before the Seed could crush him.

It's why the two disciples on the road to Emmaus said, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped that he was the one who would slay the serpent… but the serpent has slayed him.

What they didn't know is that it was Jesus, risen from the dead, who they were speaking to. What they hadn't realised is that, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities' (Is 53:5), that 'it was the will of the Lord to crush him' (Is 53:10), and that 'by his wounds that we are healed' (Is 53:5). That it was precisely at the moment when the serpent thought he had won that the serpent was being crushed. That through Jesus' death in our place for our sin, and his resurrection from the dead, that the power of sin and death, and therefore of Satan, were broken.

As Paul writes, at the cross Jesus 'Disarmed the rulers and authorities [the powers of darkness] and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them' (Col 2:15). It's why John writes, 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8). In the words of *Joy to the World*, one of the great Christmas carols, 'No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow, Far as the curse is found.'

Which is where you come in; and the middle of the story.

The Promise Lived

You see, in Philippians 2 Paul says that Jesus was 'born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Phil 2:7-11). And so one day *every* knee and *every* crushed head will bow to him.

But we live in the in-between times, in the middle of the story. And as you do, in one form or another, you'll experience the ongoing enmity of evil.

It could be plain old temptation, and the oldest lie in the book, that life will be great if you do this thing that you know you shouldn't, or decide for yourself what's right and wrong. But remember what John wrote, that 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8) and John writes that in the context of our personal sins. So, instead, remember the promise to Eve, that Christ was born to crush the lies of the serpent, and choose life and light instead of darkness.

Or maybe you look at your past, or the sin of your present, and you know you've been deceived . It promised so much, but now look. And satan comes accusing you, reminding you of just how guilty you are. Don't listen to him. Listen to the promise to Eve, listen to Jesus telling you, I have carried your sin so you don't have to, I have borne your guilt so you can have my righteousness, and I have crushed your accuser under my foot.

Or maybe, because of your past you know the reality of the powers of darkness only too well, and it feels like those powers are coming for you again. Do not fear. Christ has conquered and you are absolutely safe in his hands. They have no claim on you. His victory is your victory.

Or maybe you look at the world, or your life, and feel like the darkness is winning - and you feel hopeless or useless, or like waves of despair are crashing over you. Don't despair. Instead, pull open the door to the stable, and look in the manger, and see that the serpent slayer has been born. And the outcome is certain.

Listen to what Paul writes: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?… No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 8:35-39).

So this Advent you can know that your greatest enemies: the principalities and powers of darkness, Satan, sin and death, have all been defeated. The Offspring of the Woman has come, the promise to Eve has been kept. And nothing can separate you from his love.

And so as Paul writes to the church in Rome, 'The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.' (Rom 16:20).