



# DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

William H. Willimon, *Dean of the Chapel  
and Professor of Christian Ministry*

"THE NAKED TRUTH"  
First Sunday of Lent  
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Genesis 3:1-7

"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked...."

Last semester at The University of California, Berkeley, Andrew Martinez began appearing au naturel, attending classes, strolling about campus in the nude. He hoped to begin a campus "nude-in" to protest social repression. Campus police arrested him and Martinez was sent home. "Yes, we're a bastion of free expression," a university spokesman explained, "but first and foremost we're a bastion of higher education."

Has Mr. Martinez no shame? Apparently not. Martinez plans to write a book about his experience. Oprah, here we come!

Today's text from Genesis begins a long time ago, and you know the story must be old, primordial, because it was a time when we were then "naked and unashamed." How long ago was that for you?

You can't stroll around Duke or Berkeley in the nude, but it is possible to toddle around a nursery au naturel. Cuddly baby flesh is smooth, unmarked, innocent. And that was the way we were--the toddler romping gleefully naked after the bath, that was us. Adam and Eve were "naked and unashamed." They were only a few days old, you see. Innocent, smooth, unselfconscious in the good garden.

You're not surprised that Adam and Eve's unashamed innocence did not last long because yours did not last long. Adam and Eve grew up by late afternoon of their first day. Their eyes were opened and they were naked and ashamed. How long did it take you to open your eyes, to grow up?

Enter the snake, the serpent whom we are told was "the most subtle of all creatures," smart, savvy. Not "Satan," this serpent, just smart. The Hebrew writer of Genesis puns (Gen. 2:25) the Hebrew 'arummim (naked) with the word 'arum (wise) in the next sentence (3:1). Adam is "naked." The serpent is "wise." Whereas we were nude, the serpent is shrewd.

Self-consciousness, knowledge, is the promise of the snake. The serpent says that God knows what will happen after eating the forbidden fruit. This is the tree of knowledge, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, sophistication. Don't you want to get smart? The serpent with Adam and Eve. Seniors with Freshmen and Sophomores. Let me help you get smart without God, says the serpent. Eat. Open your eyes. Grow up. As Luther noted, our peaceful, innocent existence lasted "until afternoon of our first day" on earth.

So the fruit is eaten by the man and woman, a mutual act of rebellion and self-assertion and our eyes are opened and....look at what we see! We hoped to be wise as God, to know everything, to enjoy limitless vistas. Our eyes are opened and all we see is--**our genitals!** For all our lust for knowledge, after eating the forbidden fruit, we know one thing and one thing only--namely, that **we are naked**. Our eyes are open, yet how little we see. We now see that we are naked, exposed.

Immediately we set to work, having now only one human project: to cover our nakedness. Shame is our main motivation. We sew fig leaves together, fashioning aprons for ourselves. (Sometime, in the privacy of your own dorm room, try fig leaves as lingerie; it's got to be an unpleasant experience.

Laughable. The story is meant as a joke, and the joke is on us.)

So a few days after God made the world and all within it, our first act of human fabrication is fig leaf underwear.

"Where are you?" asks God, on his afternoon stroll.

And we pitifully reply. Where? Naked. We are naked, vulnerable, exposed, ashamed.

"Who told you that you were naked?"

Then the pitiful blaming begins, the pitiful attempt, correlate of our fig leaf wardrobe, to cover ourselves. "The woman, this woman whom **you** thought of and whom **you** had the big idea to create, she gave me the fruit." And she, "This serpent, this serpent whom **you** created, he gave me the fruit...."

Philosopher Ernest Becker (The Denial of Death) says that all human cultures--art, philosophy, architecture, religion--are pitiful fig leaf-like attempts to cover ourselves, to assemble about ourselves a protective hedge against the awesome awareness that we are dust and to dust we shall return, that we are naked. "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither," said Job (1:21). It's a story about the shady side of wisdom, the cost of knowledge, higher even than Duke tuition.

"Funny," he said to me. "I had more self-confidence, was much more sure of myself and my abilities when I was a senior in high school than now that I'm a senior at Duke."

And I said, "I can explain that to you. When you were a senior in high school, block letter sweater, world at your feet, you were stupid. Now that you've come here, taken some tough courses, been around the dorm a couple of times, learned your limits, your eyes have been opened. You've wised up." Eye-opening wisdom extracts a price.

Caught in the shame of our nakedness, physical and psychological nakedness, we wish we could go home. Even in our brokenness, we carry within us, genetically, the memory of the way life could or should be.

Our eyes were opened. We see that we are naked. We are self-conscious. All animals die. Only we **know** we shall die.

Our exile is our eyes that see.

Hawk and fish have eyes but we

Behold what they can only be....

Our exile is ourselves. (Archibald MacLeish, "Eve's Exile")

Naked, before the truth we stand, exposed, ashamed.

The First Sunday of Lent, it is our custom here to chant the Great Litany at the beginning of Lent. And you don't like it, nor do I. Not because of the music but because of its meaning. We don't like to be made to say, over and over again, "We have failed, fallen, slipped, goofed, rebelled, garbled, disobeyed, sinned. Lord, have mercy." Why rub our noses in this awesome truth which we expend most of our intellectual creativity avoiding? "I was naked. I was ashamed. I hid myself." Why force us to stand before the harsh, truthful Lenten mirror?

Robert Penn Warren's long poem, Brother to Dragons haunts me yet. In the poem, the poet has a conversation, somewhere in time, with Thomas Jefferson and members of the Jefferson family. He asks them about an event, an almost buried event, in their family when one of Jefferson's relatives, Lilburn Lewis, hacked to death with a meat axe a slave, a slave who had broken a pitcher belonging to Lilburn's mother.

Warren asks why, in all of Jefferson's speeches and writings, he failed to mention this incident. He confronts Jefferson with the horror of that event and Jefferson is obviously uncomfortable. Jefferson can't square the bloody murder with his deistic, optimistic doctrine of the nobility of human nature. The horrible fact--a poor slave hacked to pieces in a fit of rage--will not square with Mr. Jefferson's tame, humanistic philosophy. The poem ends with Mr. Jefferson pondering his own complicity in the horror, and not only Mr. Jefferson's complicity, but ours as well. "We have lifted the meat axe in the elation of

love and justice," charges the poet.

We have lain on the bed and devised evil intent in the heart.

We have stood in the sunlight and named the bad thing good and the good thing bad.

Sounds like notes from The Great Litany, doesn't it? And why? Why rub the nose of the great Thomas Jefferson in such sordid human nastiness? What good is there in such exposure, such naked stare? The poet answers:

The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.

The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.

...death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.

All else is surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit.

(Brother to Dragons, pp. 214-215)

Surely this is what Chesterton meant when he spoke of the "good news of original sin." There is good news in at least hearing the truth, the naked truth of ourselves. This may not be the end of wisdom, but it is surely the beginning. As Thomas Hardy said, "If a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst."

Cowering in the bushes, God comes to us. Earlier, we got smart and asked God questions--"Did God say?" Now God asks us questions--"Where are you? Who told you? What have you done?"

And the naked truth about us is exposed. We are naked and ashamed. In the Bible, shame is not just how you feel when you've done something you know you should not do. Shame is **being** someone you know you should not be. Shame is standing before the naked truth about ourselves and wanting to turn away, or to cover ourselves and our sin, but knowing we ought not.

And yet, there is planted deep within us, deep within the psyche, memory of primal innocence. And thus, deep within us, the hope of renovation by return, return not to ignorance, but to innocence, return to **trust**, trust in God which enables us to trust ourselves, men and women as we are. Rather than life driven by shame, life lived as trust. And we pray with the old hymn:

"Dear Lord and Father of mankind,

Forgive our foolish ways;

**Reclothe** us in our rightful mind,

In purer lives Thy service find,

In deeper reverence praise."

(John G. Whittier, 1807-1892)

Next Sunday, an old man, Nicodemus, will ask Jesus: "How can one be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" Can he go back to pre-kindergarten innocence when he's grown up and been to Duke, and seen the sights, and been exposed?

Promised to old Nicodemus is that day when we shall be born again, eyes new to the world, fresh, remade, renovated--a toddler romping gleefully naked after the bath.