

## The Crack in Everything

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The Rev. Scott Walters

We met Triff and Mary at the flower festival at St Mary's Church in Topsham, a village in the southwest of England, which was identical to the image in your mind right now of a flower festival at St Mary's Church in Topsham, in the southwest of England. Years ago Mary had seen their house, a place called Wixels, on holiday in Topsham while Triff was still a practicing architect in Norwich on the other side of England. Triff showed up a few weeks later to bid on Wixels at an auction, suddenly realizing that he was also deciding to retire. When they moved, he made the 275 mile journey on foot.

We hit it off with Triff and Mary immediately, having been seated next to them with our quiches and plastic forks at the flower festival lunch. Afterward, they invited us for tea. Wixels is a fantastic rambling house surrounded by a jungle of flowers right on the River Exe. It was built initially of two sheds from the port, with porches and breezeways added and enclosed over the years. As Triff told us the house's story, we stopped at a small den of warm panelling and a curious ceiling. Triff said he was trying to describe the little vault he was imagining to his carpenter, and said, "You know, something kind of like an upturned boat." A light went on for the carpenter, who returned the next day with a wooden rowboat he'd found along the weir. It wasn't what he'd had in mind, but it pleased Triff to no end that an actual upturned boat is what he got for a ceiling in their den.

It hadn't occurred to me until recently that Triff and Mary's ceiling was a miniature version of that one. Doesn't the Calvary ceiling look a little like an upturned boat. It's supposed to. Church architecture geeks will know that the place where the congregation sits in a traditional church is not the sanctuary. It's the nave. And nave has the same root as naval. Not as in umbilical cord, but as in Navy. It's supposed to be boat like. We're meant to feel like we're huddled together in an ark. As if we're truly being saved.

Saved from what, you might ask? And how? Well, I'm glad you asked. These are excellent questions for the first Sunday of Lent. Lent begins as the Bible begins. It begins with how things went wrong. And things begin to go wrong in the third chapter of the very first of the 66 books of the Bible. They deteriorate pretty quickly, don't you think? In chapter one God is creating the heavens and the earth out of the watery chaos, speaking day and night and stars into being, then the seas and dry ground appear, all sorts of vegetation and trees, and a great swarm of living creatures come to inhabit the air and the waters and the land, including the human ones, formed of the humus, the fertile dust of the earth. And, at each stage of creation, God declared every last bit of it good. Very good. "Tov meod," to be more precise, since we all know God was speaking Hebrew at the time. And then everything goes straight to heck. (Hell hadn't been invented yet, you see.)

Those of you who were here for Lenten Preaching last Thursday heard Debbie Blue preach brilliantly about Noah's Ark, which comes only a few pages later, in chapter six. And she asked how in the world it could be that creation could go from *tov meod* to this: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." Six short chapters to go from "absolutely everything is good" to "everyone is entirely bad."

Debbie said this is actually just what we would expect from a creative type. They've never been the most stable or reliable sorts. But it was her take on how the ark was a vessel for the healing of creation that brought me up short. We'll get to what that was in a moment. But it's the insight through which I'm reading today's story from Genesis, the moment when life in that garden of

harmony and shalom is beginning to come apart. Because that is what's happening here, isn't it? Genesis three is about the creation of apartness.

In Robert Alter's wonderful translation, the serpent begins, "Though God said you shall not eat from any tree of the garden..." And Eve interrupts him. He stands corrected. Well, if that's possible. Isn't there an old joke about how the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on? Anyway...Eve interrupts, because the serpent has got this wrong. All the trees of the garden aren't off limits. Only fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden is forbidden.

Alright. Good job, Eve. But did you notice that her correction of the serpent wasn't quite correct? She tells him, "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, *nor shall you touch it*, or you shall die.'" Read the transcript. God didn't say anything about touching. It's a small thing, I know. What's so great about touching trees? Nothing. Not until somebody says you can't, at least.

The first little crack in the wholeness of things opens with the invention of scarcity. "Think of all the trees you can't eat from!" Eve resists all but a little shard of the lie. But even she imagines something prohibited that's not. And the groundwork is laid for the way we all fall from grace. Because now, rather than having life defined by the abundance of what's been given for free, all our attention has been turned toward the tiny sliver of creation that's forbidden and scarce, and the fear it engenders expands in the minds of the pair until it is all they see. Such is the first crack in the wholeness of things. Relationships were not meant to be made of fear and competition with others for scarce goods. Relationships are to be made of trust and vulnerability and joy over all that's been given.

The crack in things is such that when Eve turns to Adam, she is not doing so to share her fruit with him. What she really needs to share is her guilt and her fear. And when guilt and fear enter, fig leaves and shame will soon follow. Two people, bone of bone and flesh of flesh, two people made for each other suddenly cover themselves from each other and hide from God, with whom they used to walk freely, receiving the gift of the cool of each evening.

Shalom is coming apart. Genesis three is the invention of apartness. We turned from the earth's abundance, which is a gift. And we obsessed over what is scarce or forbidden, sometime inventing scarcity and forbidden-ness outright. And then we built economies and systems of value on what is scarce rather than what is given, which continue to set us at odds and push us apart. This is a very old story that reads like the daily news. We're still attempting to build a human society that replaces trust and vulnerability with suspicion and competition, and it's still not working.

So what do we do? How are we to live, since sin still seems to run everywhere on the same old fear of scarcity that sets us against each other and pushes us apart? Well, Christians have often talked about sin as a contagion. You might need to climb into a bobbing little ark for the saved, which we call Church, because there's so much sin and disease out there. The problem with seeing sin as a contagion is that a contagion requires barriers. Fig leaves aren't nearly enough, I'm afraid. You need to cover yourself entirely up and probably stay away from other people completely if you're to avoid infection.

But here's what Debbie Blue said Thursday that I've never heard a single preacher say. She said what saved Noah was not being separated from a sinful, infected world. God closed him up with two of everything in creation and told him to get to work tending and feeding and birthing his fellow creatures. It helps if you smell your way into your stories. Take a long, imaginary whiff of that mythical ark, and it may begin to sink in for us that God saves us by throwing us together, not by separating us and sealing us off.

So, if the upturned ark, that is Calvary's grand old roof, signifies to us a place sealed off and separate, bobbing along safely in stormy, sinful world, we've turned the story upside down too. Separation, fear, suspicion, shame. These are the old symptoms of the crack in creation's wholeness. If this old ark of a church is going to be a vessel of salvation, it's still going to be because God has packed a couple of just about everything in here and said, "The conditions are not sanitary. Take a

whiff. They are fruitful and very much alive. But you are in this together. Learn to tend to each other and to trust. Stop covering yourselves up and be vulnerable again. Be grateful for what's given rather than obsessed with what seems scarce, and the crack in everything really can begin to heal. Thanks not to what you've been kept free of, but thanks to every living thing I've piled into this ark to ride with you."