Every now and then, I worry about my biblical literacy. I would not survive the first round of Bible bee, if it meant quoting chapter and verse or even naming the books of the Bible in order. I can never find the book of Esther, for instance, and Zephaniah and Zechariah tend to blur in my mind.

But I know the biblical story, as I expect you do, and I know the stories that make it up—especially the big ones like this morning’s story about Adam and Eve’s bad decision in the Garden of Eden. Most of us learned it when we were very young as the story of the Fall—from storybook Bibles with vivid illustrations of snakes as big as the trees they wrapped themselves around, we learned how Adam and Eve fell from the grace of eternal life in paradise to everyday hell on earth because of their disobedience—and that if we did not want to be chased from our own homes and Sunday School classrooms by fierce angels with flaming swords then we had best obey our parents and teachers, who were after all God’s representatives on earth. Didn’t it go something like that?

Or maybe you learned a slightly different version when you were a little older: that the story of the Fall is the story of how original sin came into the world, that because Adam and Eve made the decision they did we are somehow contaminated by our kinship with them, infected with congenital germs of pride and greed that are always waiting to break out in us if we are not very stern with ourselves, if we do not remain on our best and most holy behavior. The nice thing about this reading of the story is that it contains its own loophole. When we fail—when we fall—well, it was inevitable, after all. We are only human.

But neither of these readings is supported by the text itself. Nowhere in all the Bible, in fact, are the words "fall" or "original sin" ever used to refer to this story. Both of those are labels that were applied much, much later, in an effort to make sense of the story, to discover its moral and learn its lesson so that humankind would not keep on falling forever. But that kind of things never works, I am happy to say. If it did, if we could reduce the holy Word of God to a book full of slogans, then we could shelve the Bible next to Aesop’s fables and let it go at that. What we have got instead is a book of stories so full of real life, so full of passion and paradox and real people that they outfox all our efforts to pin them down.

Take today’s story about Adam and Eve, for instance. Sure, it is a story about temptation and sin and judgment, but that is not what keeps it alive for me; it does not stick in my mind because I need one more reminder of my essential depravity, one more warning about what will happen to me if I just go around indulging my fallen nature and doing as I please. That is old, old news;
I already know that. No, what haunts me about the story of Adam and Eve is what I do not know—namely, not how they sinned but how they survived. How did they go on after they had defied the God by whom and in whom and for whom they had their being? How did they fashion a future from such a short and sorry past? And how in the world did they live through the loss of paradise?

Paradise. Even for those of us who have never been there, the word conjures up green ferns, blue skies, bright water, warm breezes—peace and plenty of it, plenty of everything, including the benevolent presence of God. Paradise was that place where there was no fear or shame, where there was nothing to hide and nothing to hide from; a place where nothing had ever been broken, where there were no chips or dents or scars; a place where everything was still whole and holy and pleasing to God.

The best way the writer of Genesis could think of to describe such a place was to say that it was the kind of place where you could walk around naked, where you could skinny dip to your heart’s content. It was that safe—so safe, in fact, that it might never even occur to you that you were naked, at least as long as you stayed away from the fruit of one particular tree.

But you know the story. Eve did not stay away; she and the serpent engaged in the first recorded theological debate, after which she bit into the fruit of the one particular tree and nothing was ever whole again. Paradise was lost, and there was no going back. Do you know the feeling? Like in a dream: you watch your hand reach out to cradle the bright, heavy fruit, knowing you are not hungry, knowing it is not yours to take but taking it anyway, your muscles on remote control, your mind a buzzing hive, your heart on hold. You take, you eat, and it is very good, but before you can swallow, things have already begun to change—the light becomes dull, the wind stops, your hands are sticky and heavy as wood. You look down at them and find that you are naked—it is one of those dreams—so you try to cover yourself and then to run, but it is no use. You are stuck, rooted to the spot, exposed for anyone who passes by to see.

Actually, if it had happened that way for Adam and Eve their story might have had a different ending; but when they discover that they are naked they do manage to cover themselves and then to run away and hide, so that when the Lord God seeks their company in the cool of the day he has to look for them. "Where are you?" he says, and the alibis begin to fly. Adam blames God for giving him Eve, and then blames her for including him in her sin, while Eve retaliates by blaming the serpent for tricking her. Nothing is sacred, apparently. These two are willing to sacrifice their integrity, their relationship, and their dominion over the garden in their frantic efforts to cover their nakedness, all of which gets them nowhere. Beginning with the serpent, the Lord God delivers their sentences: pain for Eve, toil for Adam, dust to dust for them both.

And of course he was right—is God ever wrong?—but still, what a colossal loss, what a mortal blow. You give in to one crazy, selfish desire; you look away from the light for one moment and the car crashes, the job vanishes, the
relationship ends, and there is no going back. Paradise is lost and what was, or what could have been, is gone forever. How do you survive something like that?

Well, there are a couple of ways, actually. You can, as we have seen, find someone else to blame for what has happened to you. That way you get to be angry instead of hurt and afraid, but you also have to remain a victim. If someone else has ruined your life, after all, then it is up to someone else to repair it, which doesn't leave you much to do but sit around and wait to be fixed.

On the other hand you can blame yourself, punishing yourself in a number of different ways. You can keep track of your failures, for instance, withdrawing from life a little more with each one of them until you are afraid to come out of hiding long enough to try anything at all. Or you can take the opposite tack, driving yourself harder and harder to make up for your losses, settling for nothing less than perfection in yourself and those around you.

You can blame paradise, convincing yourself that it was not so hot after all, or you can blame God, pointing out that he is the manufacturer, after all, and that if he expects us to be different then he should have made a different world in the first place. Who, for instance, made the snake?

According to legend, God gave Adam and Eve a cave to live in just east of Eden, where they sat in shock for months after their eviction from the garden, reciting every detail they could remember to each other: the shade of the trees, the warmth of the sun, the beauty of the land. Eve offered to kill herself if God would let Adam back into the garden alone but Adam would not hear of it, although he tried to end his own life soon after by jumping off a cliff. When both of them had failed in their suicide attempts, they wept and beat their breasts and altogether begged God to let them return to Eden but he said, with enormous divine sadness, that he could not—that once he had given his word even he could not take it back.

Instead he sent them angels to sing to them and sprinkle scented water on them to cool them. He reconciled the beasts of the earth to them, charging the animals to be gentle with them, but Adam and Eve could not be roused from their despair. For eighty-three days they languished, refusing all food and drink for fear they would sin again. God gave them a fountain of living water to drink, but took it back when they tried to drown themselves in it. He sent them figs from the garden to eat, as big as watermelons, which they left for the crows.

Finally, legend goes, when their bodies were stained from exposure and they were speechless with heat and cold, Adam and Eve let God teach them how to sew, using thorns for needles and sheepskins to make shirts for themselves to cover their nakedness. It was a big step. Having lost paradise, having run out of bushes and alibis to hide behind, having all but killed themselves through guilt and exposure, Adam and Eve decided to let God clothe them. "Fear not," an angel sang to them that night, "the God who created you will strengthen you." And so he did. Although Satan continued to plague them all their days, Adam and Eve decided to live. The days of peace and plenty
were gone for good, but they got by--using all the scraps at hand, they managed to build first an altar and then a home, to bake bread from the wild wheat of the field and to bear five children. Using the pieces of their broken past, they made a future for themselves and for their descendants in the world outside of Eden, a world we continue to live in today. It is a world full of chips and dents and scars--even where we have glued it back together you can still see the cracks, but in its own way it is exceedingly lovely--a mosaic of many colors, a mended work of art, a testament to the God who is willing to work with broken pieces and who calls his people to do the same.

Whenever the people of God gather around his table to be fed, they do roughly the same thing. First they hear the biblical story--their story--and then they pray, and then someone holds up the bread--the round, white, whole, perfect symbol of God's presence among us. Then, at the very crescendo of the service, the person holding the bread breaks it into pieces, reminding us that our wholeness does not lie behind us but ahead of us, in the company of the Lord who made us, who feeds us and clothes us, and who dwells among us this side of Eden, until he can bring us home. Amen.