

Stories that hurt, stories that heal (Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19)

While there is much in the Fall story that might be healing, its primary legacy has been . . . well, “hurtful” seems far too weak a word.

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Early in my ministry, a book came out that had a lot of us talking: *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal*, by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. His premise was simple, if as old as the Jewish wisdom undergirding it: that once a word is uttered it has a life of its own.

I seem to remember that by “words,” Telushkin means all forms of oral and written expression, whether barbs or blessings, insults or benedictions—all the way up to characterizations and generalizations.

Curiously, words of blessing or, as Rabbi Samuel Hellman describes them, “good gossip”—those phrases like “did you hear” and “how can we help” that not only prove but reinforce our interrelatedness, even as they both initiate and potentially extend our mutual care—seem to have less power and effect than deprecations. As we have seen so much of late, libel and slander have almost inexhaustible, irretrievable, and irreversible potential to damage both individuals and groups, not least by careless reductionism.

If, today, I were to build on Telushkin’s work, I might write a follow-up along the lines of *Stories that Hurt, Stories that Heal* and include, perhaps as chapter one, an examination of the story in Genesis 2 concerning the first woman, the snake, and, yes, the first man.

While there is much in this story that might be healing, its primary legacy has been . . . well, “hurtful” seems far too weak a word to describe its legacy. For Christians, the sad history of this story’s retelling and interpretation has provided nothing much other than a hurtling juggernaut of unexamined recriminations against women. And wouldn’t it be nice if, just as the story of Jesus’ righteousness begins to overcome the story of Adam’s sin, the obedience of Mary or the faithfulness of Mary Magdalene could supplant the story of Eve?

Harvey Cox called us, decades ago, to “not leave it to the snake.” He had it in mind that the myth as we interpret it misplaces blame and teaches us to do the same. As the woman blamed the snake, the man blamed the woman. By rehearsing and amplifying divisive stories, we continue in that way of narrative vilification.

One might even conclude that our current “original sin” is a matter of being born into a heritage of imprecation and misplaced culpability—and our actual sin, telling bad stories. Bad storytelling. Stories that hurt.

And indeed, we all of us are marked by and bear the burden of hurtful, dehumanizing stories. We all perpetuate those same kinds of stories. Such tropes result in victim-blaming, racial profiling, partisan polarizations, church disaffiliations, and more.

But Lent affords us the opportunity to revisit the great stories, reframe them, and tell them now in healing rather than hurtful ways.