



## *The Fall* by Michelangelo

### Lenten Reflection

In 1508 a very reluctant Michelangelo Buonarroti was commissioned by the very persistent Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the newly restored Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was a sculptor not a painter. His jealous rivals had recommended him for the project hoping he would accept and fail. The assignment was massive—a 12,000 square foot vaulted ceiling sixty feet above the floor with paint applied to wet plaster to create the fresco. The job took four years to complete. The results are breathtaking and represent one of the greatest works of art in the world. Needless to say, his rivals never bet against Michelangelo again.

### **The Fall**

In the center of the vault is a panel titled “The Fall.” Two scenes from Genesis 3 were merged together to create one image. On the left, Adam, standing ten feet tall, was depicted with Eve in the garden. Both are reaching towards the right with hands extended ready to grasp a fig from the fig tree in the center of the painting. Coiled around the trunk of the fig tree is a huge snake with a feminine face and torso offering a fig to Eve. On the right side of the painting, Adam and Eve, looking much older and with expressions of fear and shame on their faces, flee the garden. Between the tree and the fleeing couple hovers a red angel with a sharp sword pointed at Adam’s neck.

During the first week of Lent, I have sat with this painting each morning and reflected on what it might say to me and the people I work with. The process is similar to looking at cloud formations. Some of us see cute bunnies and others see fire breathing dragons. The end result is less an art history lesson and more a psychological interpretation. Here are four things that caught my attention:

### **Naked People**

In 1522 puritanical Pope Hadrian VI was so embarrassed with all the naked people on the ceil-

ing of his chapel, he threatened to have the work destroyed. Thankfully he died eighteen months later before his wishes could be carried out. Michelangelo's nude figures are an artistic way to depict a person as their authentic self. Yesterday someone said to me, "I just want to be my real self. I don't want to always have to be my professional self or my Facebook self. I don't want to have to put something on, be it accomplishments, credentials, or a sunny disposition, in order to be accepted by others. I want to be able to relax in my own skin."

## Reaching for More

The figures on the left reach and grasp for fruit on the tree. They desire more. They are discontent with what they have. It's hard for us to be content. It's un-American. We want more experiences, more friends, more recognition, more influence, more possessions, more entertainment, and more security delivered to us faster and cheaper. In our secular world, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the internet. It's ready to satisfy our longings and tell us what we want to know, be it how to bathe a baby or build a bomb. In spite of all the good that the internet can offer us, it is also seductive. Friends speak of feeling enticed to spend hours "surfing" the internet. But their preoccupation leaves them feeling estranged from God and their deeper self. Their lives end up becoming too full and superficial. One friend decided to fast from the internet during his sabbatical. He said to me last week, "I love to see my six month-old son smile. That smile fills me with joy and it gives me a sense of how God feels about me. I would have missed that smile three months ago because my life was too full."

## Despair

To the right of innocent Eve's outstretched left arm is a dead tree stump. If you look closely you will notice that the profile of the dead branch matches the profile of Adam's right arm and the temptress's left arm. The image is an artistic way of foreshadowing the results of the interaction between Adam, Eve, and the snake—death. Is the human experiment on earth doomed? When I listen to my young friends, I often hear despair just below the surface. Global warming, explosive population growth, corrosive political discourse, social injustice and violence make it increasingly difficult to listen to the six- o'clock news and be an optimistic person in today's world.

## Hope

Michelangelo was said to have had a dour, melancholy disposition which may be reflected in this painting. Given my own disposition, that may be why I am drawn to this work. But we all need hope to get out of bed in the morning. So where is hope in this ancient story and work of art? I noticed that the tree with its limbs extending left and the arm of the red angel extending right create a cross. The human experiment did not end in Genesis 3. In the center of history there is a cross. In the center of the human drama there is another tree that offers us love, life, and hope. And hidden from view is another artist, greater than Michelangelo, who is determined to keep working with his painting until it comes out the way he always intended.

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