

It's the Going That Matters

by

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

³Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but 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.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

We've been talking about God's good creation and our place in it these last few weeks. So we return this morning to the Garden. With Adam. And Eve. Where everything was perfect. Until it wasn't. What happened that day with the two of them and the snake? How did it go so wrong? Whose to blame? And for what?

We've been telling, reading, preaching, and studying the story of the Garden of Eden for at least 2,800 years, since scholars believe it was first penned. And over that time, we've applied, critiqued, analyzed, and disputed everything about it. Even that hasn't exhausted the wonder of it all.

What do all those years of tradition and history tell us about what happened here? What does this old, old story still have to say?

Maybe we should start with those two fools in the Garden. Adam and Eve. A close reading of the creation story and biblical scholarship tell us there are two creation accounts in Genesis, more than likely the product of two different communities, which in an attempt to be reconciled, were cobbled together by an early editor of Genesis. Our text this morning is from the second account.

There, God breathed into the dust, and gave life to *Adam*, that Hebrew word meaning "man." And God placed Adam in Eden, the NRSV says "to till it and keep it" the NIV reads "to work it and take care of it," and the King James reads, "to dress it and to keep it." But God saw that it wasn't good for Adam to be alone, and soon fashioned Eve from bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

Eve is created as his partner. His equal. And so it is that Adam and Eve were both in the Garden, and though they didn't have a word for it yet, they were happy. Content with the life that surrounded them. In the immediate presence of the God who created them.

The word *Eden*, actually means “abundance, plenty, fullness”; pointing to the resources that surround them. And God told them, “You may eat freely of any tree in the whole garden, but eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and you’re gonna die.”

It’s similar to when I look at our dog, an Australian Shepherd named Sophie, a Greek word meaning wisdom. And just as she’s about to jump on our kitchen counter and get the last piece of Buffalo Chicken Lasagna, I point to her and say, “You do it, you die.” Which of course translates into canine as “Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.” And off she goes, jaws clenching that pasta-rolled goodness, wincing as I chase after her with a wooden spoon.

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“The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” It’s parallel in the story is the tree of life; which alludes to the fact that Adam and Eve could have had immortality if they would have obeyed. It was the one thing they couldn’t have, and so of course, until they were told that, they probably hadn’t even noticed it anyway.

They had a good thing going, until the serpent came. Later Jewish and Christian tradition says he was the devil. But that’s actually nowhere to be found in this story. The idea of the Devil would come centuries later.

No, the serpent was merely crafty, the Hebrew word also can be translated as ‘trickster.’ Snakes were symbols of wisdom, and the human potential for discernment in ancient Mesopotamia, but in many ancient stories they exist to function as the truth-seekers, those who pursue knowledge at their own peril.

Regardless of who he is, the serpent speaks to Eve, not Adam. And slicker than a car salesman at Wilkie Lexus, he asks Eve a question he already knows the answer to. “Did God say, ‘you shall not eat from any

tree in the garden?” He asks her. Eve could have answered with a simple yes or no. But instead she says, “We may eat of the fruit of trees in the Garden; But 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.’”

Scholars are confused about why she added that they couldn’t touch it, because God didn’t say that part. Maybe, since it was only Adam who was there when God first gave the commandment, he just adlibbed that part when he told Eve.

And the serpent replied, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” His words are worth paying attention to, because in this moment he’s not so much a deceiver as he is a truth-teller.

The serpent is right that Adam and Eve won’t die just because they ate the tree. Since the tree of life is in the garden, all they have to do is keep eating from it and they’ll be fine. The sly way in which he says, ‘for God knows that when you eat of it...’ It’s like he’s saying, “There’s something God’s not telling you, something God’s holding back from you.”

The whole statement is an attempt to put God on the stand. Can we trust God when we aren’t told all the facts? Does God know what God is doing? We don’t know how long she pondered it. All we know is that without another word, Eve ate from the tree and gave some to Adam, and after eating it, the text says “then the eyes of both were opened...’

John Calvin says of this moment, “And this is the origin of freewill, that Adam wished to be independent, and dared to try what he was able to do.” Except Calvin’s a little mistaken, because it wasn’t Adam, it was Eve.

It was Eve who brought knowledge into the world. It was Eve who birthed awareness of good and evil into reality. It was Eve, whose senses were first awakened, and whose eyes burned with the awareness that for the first time, she was actually able to see.

What she saw, beyond just her own nakedness is anyone's guess. But nothing would ever be the same again. I'm not inclined to believe, as many in church history have, that everything was wonderful before that bite. My hunch is that Adam and Eve just couldn't see that it wasn't.

It makes no sense that she could then perceive evil if, until that moment, there was no such thing. Which means there probably was evil, brokenness, injustice, despair, and she just couldn't see it.

The Women's Bible Commentary says, "the woman believes the snake, and in an important pun, the narrator says that she sees the tree is good to look at/good for making one wise. She is no easy prey for a seducing demon, as later tradition represents her, but a conscious actor choosing knowledge. Together with the snake, she is a bringer of culture."

Regardless of what she beheld, God was right, there would be no going back. No one can unsee things. Or unknow things, or un-experience things. And so they had to leave the Garden, with tears in their eyes knowing that beyond those gates lies a world for which they aren't prepared, and from which they may not make it out alive.

How would we describe Adam and Eve? Chances are, many of us might say they were adults, looking to be in their mid-thirties, their bodies in peak shape, images of divine perfection. But in the Eastern Church, the Orthodox believe and teach that Adam and Eve were children, a mere 11 or 12 years old when they left the Garden. Created as infants, they grew up in the lush jungle of God's idyllic creation.

It makes a difference in how we hear the story doesn't it? It's hard to judge a 10-year-old who eats or touches something their parent told them not to. And one doesn't have to be around toddlers very long to see that they can be selfish and self-centered as they begin to understand self-differentiation and how individuals work with others.

And in hearing it that way, I wonder if God didn't know we would do this all along. That this wasn't about original sin as much as it was about growing up, about leaving home, about seeking after knowledge, and then longing to go back for the rest of our lives.

How many parents have grieved over their child leaving the nest, knowing the hurts and pains that the world would bring them, but also knowing that a life worth living is a life lived in this world, with all its joys and heartbreak, pleasure and pain.

If that's true, then God grieved for when we would choose to leave, warned us of what we would find, and with teary-eyes, opened the front door.

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Several years ago I helped a family member edit a high school essay she was writing on utopian societies. As I was reading her draft, it occurred to me that all these societies were trying in vain to do, was simply to recreate that initial paradise, by escaping the world. We're all trying to get back to Eden aren't we? And it is a double-edged sword, once we leave the Garden, and find the truth, and can see Good and Evil, we long for the days when we couldn't.

We want to go back into the cave, and sit with the shadows. But we can't, because the light that first drew us out is now illuminating a world full of hurts and injustices and places where there is much work to be done.

That's in part what we are doing today. We are surrounding our confirmands—who will make their witness of faith in completion of their baptismal covenant—with our witness. We are holding them up with our hopes and God's love. And then we are sending them straight out those doors to live the truth of it, to see the world in a new way, in the affirmation of God's love for them and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.

And just as important, to remind them not to look away from the horrors of the world, but to be God's partner in the work of redemption and restoration. They won't always get it right, but neither do we. I suspect that's not the point. It's the going that matters.

That day in the Garden, God looked at Adam and Eve and pointed to the tree and said "you do it, you die!" But they bit into the fruit anyway, wincing as they did, prepared for the coming cosmic wooden spoon.

If it's true that we are made in the Image of God, then like I've done with my dog, God chases after us; and after catching us, God takes us to the tub, washes us clean, kisses our snout, laughs and calls us 'good,' even when we have made choices that seem to indicate otherwise.

God knows full well that we will reach for the forbidden the first chance we get. Eating the buffalo chicken lasagna may be called sin. But calling us good anyway is called grace. And grace always wins. Paradise Lost? Maybe. But those two fools aren't any different from us.

In fact, they are us. We are them. We've been ditching paradise for the hard road ever since.

Today, let's have the courage to see the world for what it is, make mistakes as we try to move tenderly in it, and trust in God's unfathomable grace and mercy to bring us home at the end. Amen.