

Sermon, February 10, 2008, The first Sunday of Lent
 Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

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

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

We all know how the “Garden of Eden” story ends. I’ve decided to put another spin on it for you to consider. We know that a seemingly vengeful and hardhearted God expels his first two attempts at making *good* people from their garden home because they disobeyed him. It’s a great story. I’ve read it several times this week, inserting the voices of folks that would best suit the characters of the story, in my mind. How about Alan Rickman as the crafty serpent? Morgan Freeman as the voice of God. Geena Davis as the innocent and deceived Eve. I find this part of the creation story, the Fall, very sensual and visually tangible with its description of the crafty serpent, the innocent woman, the forbidden fruit, the serpent’s dare, (“*go on, have just a little bite, it won’t kill you.*”)

Eve sees that the tree was good for food, *a delight to her eyes*, and the tree should be desired, not avoided. She wonders, “*why would God want that particular tree left alone?*” Naturally she shared its fruit with the one who was with her, everyday. Its time we stop blaming Eve for The Fall, she was just being thoughtful when she gave some to her partner. They ate, their eyes were opened: what a story!

What jumps out at me, is the descriptions of the tree itself. God calls it “*the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*” But Eve tells the scheming snake that God said the tree was a *fruit tree in the middle of the garden*, as if it was placed where she and Adam would not come across the tree to often, and they should stay away from it. In my mind picture a large, solitary Southern Chestnut tree dripping Spanish Moss from its limbs, stuck smack in the middle of a steamy, lush, garden; something like a rain forest.

So we have a tree that offers fruit and knowledge, and it is in the *middle* of everything. Avoiding it is a contradiction in itself - the tree seems to have what the people need: sustenance and wherewithal, access and freedom....abundant life.

My dictionary offers one definition of fruit as an “outgrowth,” and knowledge is defined as “information, facts, and data.” So, humor me if you will, but doesn’t it sound as though God didn’t want Adam and Eve to have some sort of information, facts, and data that they would outgrow their need to just loll around in paradise all day? Did God really intend to keep his people all to himself, safely there in the garden, or did God *know* (perhaps hope) they would one day find the tree, be tempted, take a bite out of life, and suddenly see everything more clearly, gain their freedom, and be on their way? After all, God told Eve the tree was in the middle of the garden, and she either went looking for it or found her way there by chance one day. She was overcome by temptation, and the rest of the story is the so-called beginning of human destiny: desire, temptation, indulgence, trouble. I feel *God* was the crafty character in this story.

It was bound to happen. Who could resist? Look at us today. Don’t we want nice things, our heart’s desire? Don’t we hunger for knowledge, facts, data, and information? If one were to rewrite this scene in the Garden in the contest of knowledge

of good and evil today, God could say, “*you may eat of any tree in the garden, but do not go near the Google in the middle of the garden.*” The word Google, which once described a cartoon character’s eyes “*Barney Google, with the goo-goo-googley eyes,*” is now an internet information icon and the biggest source of knowledge....good and evil....in the world, and its right at most of our fingertips. What did you “Google” this week, or **were you** “Googled” this week....**who** have you “Googled,” seeking the personal information of another....forbidden fruit. Relax, its bound to happen, who could resist....”*go on, put the name in the little box and click.....search.*”

Perhaps, God wasn’t so much concerned that Adam and Eve would sin and disobey Him, as He was concerned they would **know** they could...know that they had a choice and they couldn’t deal with having choice, and they would chose evil over good. Or as Paul interprets The Fall to the Romans: *people had the free gift of justification, good reason, and enlightenment at their fingertips and perhaps God thought they couldn’t handle it.* Look at all the *choice* we have at our fingertips today....can we handle it? It’s all pretty tempting.

We the descendents of the first humans will circle, meander, and slither around temptation each and every day (large and small temptations) until it’s within our grasp and we get to decide. Bite it, or let it be. God leaves it all up to us. God knows what decision we will make, but what’s unclear is will we seek him or run from him, if we get ourselves in trouble by our decisions.

I tend to look at this portion of the creation story as the crossing of God’s people from *childhood innocence* into *adult responsibility*, not as the “Fall of Man.” And, even with all the emphasis placed on the man’s “higher” responsibility in the Garden, tilling it, keeping it well, naming the animals, Eve is the hero of the story. She and the man share her find, they take it in, and they become fully human, which is what God intended all along. Right?

God gave His only Son the same human qualities, and Jesus dealt with temptation every day of his life, just like the rest of us - some days more, as we hear in the Gospel lesson today. The lessons in Eve and Jesus’ story of great temptation are the same: live life fully, with eyes wide open, and like God, we will see good and evil. But the rub is: we have to decide, which will it be? Good or evil? And what will we do with that kind of power. What will we do after our decision is made.

Humans are the only species that can conceive of a thing like morality and ethics. In the first Genesis creation story, we are told that humans are made “*in the image and likeness of God.*” And having a sense of what is good and what is bad, what is hurtful and what is helpful, humans can participate with God in the work of continuing creation....do God’s will on earth. But first, we must *leave* the garden of childhood, of innocence. First we must to *grow into beings* that may not be that different in the physical sense from other creatures in God’s creation. But in the spiritual sense we are godlike, of God’s image. We can take responsibility for our actions. We have eaten of the tree of the “knowledge of good and evil” a knowledge that brings with it pain and death as well as joy and fulfillment – abundant life, just as God intended (Ralph Milton).

This portion of the creation story, is about wrestling with temptation and evil. It is not about the wrath of an overbearing God over sinful beings. The danger in consuming the story literally is we lose the story’s power for our lives today.

The fully human Jesus had to wrestle with temptations every day of his earthly life, big and small, just like you and me. The more clearly we can take in that aspect of his life and see it in terms of our struggles, the more his life story can speak to us. In spite of making sometimes-poor choices, we remain *God's beloved with whom he is pleased*, just like Christ.

Most of us are in positions of economic, social and religious power. It may not seem like that all of the time. But compared to many the folks who sleep on the streets in our nearby city's center, wonder where their next meal will come from – compared to the vast majority of people in the world, many of us possess a greater share of wealth and power in the context of everyday life. And like Jesus and Eve, we make choices about how we use that power.

The creation story is probably taken in as one of the most threatening stories in the Bible: disobey God, and you're out on your ear. Yes indeed, we have a natural tendency to make faulty decisions (some say commit sin); we are prone to rebel against God and our neighbors; and there's the result of those faulty decisions we must live with, but judgment and the resulting plea for fairness isn't what we really need - we need mercy and God has always offered to nourish us with mercy and grace.

Thanks to Eve, we have the *Knowledge of Good and Evil*. And thanks to God, we have the free gift to use it.