

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 Bill Uetrict 1 Lent 2.26.23

I am a big fan of many of the stories we get from the book of Genesis. While we know that they are not historical, they are, nonetheless, so true. And today I would like to do some more in-depth Bible study of our first reading, one of Genesis' best stories, so that we discover how true they really are.

The story comes in the midst of the second creation narrative of Genesis. God has created the heavens and the earth in the blink of an eye, and then he takes some time in creating and dealing with the humans. He's made the earth creature, you could call it "Adam," having not yet created gender, man and woman, but that is coming. We are told that "the Lord God took the earth creature and put it in the garden to till it and keep it."

Now there is some evidence that the verbs are not translated well there. The word for till could probably be translated "serve," and the word for "keep" as "protect." While you may think that is an insignificant move, it really isn't. Sadly, throughout the history of this country and the Western world in general, we have seen the human job as controlling the world around us, rather than serving and caring for it. The consequence has been ecological disaster. The original Hebrew probably suggests that your job and my job is not to control the earth, but to care for it, tend to it.

"And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'"

We humans are given great permission. We can eat of every tree in the garden but one. A lot of times religion is sold as a big listing of prohibitions. You *can't* do this. You *can't* do that. You *can't* do this. But that is not the case in our story. You can do everything, but there's just one limit. You can't eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (or perhaps, better translated, good and bad). In other words, the one thing you can't do is know everything. (Everything includes the good

and the bad, right?) If you eat of it, there will be horrible consequences. The writer puts it this way: “You will die.”

Now what we receive in the next portion of our text includes what occurs after God creates gender. In the section of Genesis that is skipped today, God turns the earth creature into two beings: a man and a woman. And they are both in the garden when a talking snake appears. (You got to love Biblical stories. They are so much fun.) The author of Genesis tells us: “Now the serpent was more crafty (clever, probably) than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.”

This, by the way, is not Satan. This is one of God’s good creations, a snake. We often don’t understand this, but it’s the good things that are often the problem for us. It’s our best gifts that sometimes make us pains to other people. Just because you stay away from the bad things seldom means that you’ve overcome the hard stuff. The bad things are obvious. You may be able to avoid them. But sometimes the good things—call them money, sex, the Bible, religion, great talents—can entangle you, lead you astray, create idols in your lives. Pay attention to the way that the good wants to entrap you.

It was a *good* creature of God, albeit a clever one, that becomes a problem in our story. This good, sneaky snake said to the woman: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

Well, no, God didn’t say that. He said that they could eat of every tree, except for one. Isn’t it interesting that the snake claims that the prohibitions are bigger than what God said? Be on guard for crabby people for whom everything is NO! God seems to be on the side of permission, not prohibition.

And then woman corrects the talking snake: “We may eat of the fruit of the 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.’”

Woman, he didn’t say that. He said nothing about not touching it. Again, a lot of people like to make the rules bigger and more numerous.

More rules satisfy some people. Try to figure that out, if you can. I have some theories, but I'll leave them to a future sermon.

"But the snake said to the woman, '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 bad.'"

What a temptation! Wisdom! Being like God! Knowing it all! The snake is on to something. It sounds rather inviting. I think I am ready to take a bite of that fruit. Don't be who I am—a human being. Be like God. Oh, I bet it tastes so good.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and 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." Oh, man! He's a wimp. He's heard the whole pitch and says nothing. He just goes along. They both want to be like God.

Here's the human problem, and the snake seems to know it. We want to be in charge. We want to be in control. We don't want to be in the position simply to receive life; we want to grab life, make it our own. We don't want to have to trust. We want to know with certainty. But you see, we were not created to be God. Our identity is not God. Our identity is human. To be human is not to know it all. (Tell that to a lot of religion which is all about knowing everything and telling everybody else what they are supposed to know.) To be human is to be vulnerable. To be human is to rely on trust. But we don't want to be human. Just ask the snake.

"Then 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 think we want to be in control. We think we want to boss people and life around. We think we want to know it all. We think we don't want to be human. But there are consequences for our not staying in our own lane, consequences for our creating a job description for ourselves that we weren't intended to live into. And so, we notice our nakedness. We had been naked all along, and that was

fine. We were having too good of a time to pay attention to it. Now, we can't help but notice it. In other words, we are full of shame. We've lost our innocence.

So, we try to take matters into our own hands again. We cover up our nakedness with some fig leaves. Now, I must tell you that those who first heard this story would have started laughing at this point. They understood that fig leaves are really scratchy. Taking matters into our own hands only gave us scratchy underwear. When your job description doesn't include being God, pretending that you are provides you a pretty miserable life. When you know it all and when you want to control everything and everybody, life isn't going to be very good. You are going to irritate other people and yourself.

Old Testament expert John Holbert says that this great story from Genesis explains why it is that you and I need to start this trip into Lent in the first place. Here's why we need to go into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. We regularly forget who we are. It's the human problem. We forget that we are human, that we are not called to run the universe or everyone else's lives. We regularly don't read the job description that is titled "Human." We keep trying to play the role that isn't ours. We bow down at the feet of control and power all the time. It's why we need so many guns, fight so many wars, are so violent, seek so much money, feel as if we need to know it all.

We need a little retreat so that we can understand who we really are. That's the purpose of Lent. We go into the wilderness so that we can remember our job description. And as we go there, we meet up with Jesus, who also had to go there. Right after he was baptized, he was taken into the wilderness, where all people who are worth their salt go. There he didn't meet a snake; he met the devil, who presented to him an identity crisis. "*If you are the Son of God,*" the devil says to him on several occasions. The wilderness is a place to deal with who he really is.

*"If you are the Son of God, center your life on economic power, turn the stones into bread. If you are the Son of God, focus your life on*

religious power and religious pizzazz, jump off the pinnacle of the temple. *If* you are the Son of God, make political power what your life is all about, fall down and worship Satan.”

“But, no,” Jesus says. My life isn’t going to be about power. My life isn’t going to be about control. My life is going to be about trust. I know who I am. I am a truly human one. And I am going to stay in my lane. As Paul points out in Romans today, Adam went one way, and Jesus went another. Adam, the first man, who couldn’t handle being human brought us death, scratchy underwear. Jesus, the new human, the new Adam, who embraced his humanity, brought us life.

And he did so through the cross. If the cross of Lent means anything at all, it signifies that the way of God is not a way of power and control. Jesus took the way that required trust because trust is the first line in the human being’s job description, even if snakes may tell you otherwise.