

1st Sunday of Lent
Sermon 2.26.23

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

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep 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, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Now 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!'" The woman said to the serpent, "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, or you shall die.'" But the serpent 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 evil." So 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. 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.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (513)

Scripture's earliest preacher is the serpent. If preaching is interpreting the word of God, then the first one to do this according to the Bible is the serpent.

Let this be a warning. Things aren't always as they seem.

Before the serpent interprets the word, though, he asks for some clarification. Or at least he pretends to. "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

But this is a confusion of things more than an attempt at clarification. The question as the serpent asks it could mean two very different things.

One is to suggest God is withholding, even cruel. "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" as if God had said you can't eat from any of the many trees. Of this

bounty, of this abundance: you can't eat *any* of it? What a cruel God! More tempter than even the devil!

But the other is to suggest that God is permissive, except for one. "Did God say, of all the trees in the garden, there are any of which you cannot eat?" Of this bounty, of this abundance: is there anything here you *can't* have, you *shouldn't* have? As if God might be protecting them from something, these people, these infant people, who had no knowledge of good, still less knowledge of evil, which God might have been hoping to keep that way.

It was the latter, of course. God had said they could eat of any of this, except not the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—this divided knowledge, if you will. This, the woman reported. She replied with a recitation of God's words to her, as if she had memorized them but not necessarily understood them, to say nothing of understanding what the serpent was up to—causing her to doubt God's good providing, causing her to wonder whether God had the people's interests in mind at all.

Maybe God really was all about withholding.

Maybe God was just a power-player, a show off and a tyrant.

Maybe it was the *serpent* who had the best interests of the people in mind. Maybe it was *him* whom they could trust.

That would seem to be the case, if what the serpent said is true. "You will not die," as if God had lied, and by this the serpent interpreted the word—this elusive, mysterious word of God that just needed some clarification so the people might better understand. "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."

Which now has the serpent not merely suggesting that God had lied about the power of the fruit of the tree, but also had lied about the power of knowing evil as being so supposedly grave that it leads to death—though this is true. Knowing evil does indeed lead to death. Evil unleashed and at play has, as its outcome, death. Worse than this, though, is the more insidious suggestion that God doesn't want us to be like God, that indeed God is in a competitive attitude about God's creatures, defensive of his power in their regard, in *our* regard.

But why take what the serpent said as true? The story makes it clear; the serpent is crafty. And yet so much preaching and moralizing on this story accepts the serpent's framing of how God regards us people, as a threat to God's power, as grasping after it in such a way as makes God all

the more withholding of it. “Don’t have such hubris!” so much preaching goes. “Don’t try to be like God. Know your place.”

I think this is wrong. I think God *does* want us to be like God. God is being, which being we should surrender to and repose in. God is love, which love we’re to receive and to offer all the world around. God is grace, which easy power brings beauty and light. God is creativity and nurturance, which begets life in a most abundant, joyful way. God is justice, whose balance is peace.

What’s more, God sent us God’s Son to embody God’s word and will, who then gathered disciples by saying this very thing: “Follow me,” which suggests quite strongly that we’re to aim to be like Jesus who is himself like God.

What’s still more, tradition would present us practices called *Imitatio Dei* and *Imitatio Chirsti*, which is to say, “Imitation of God” and “Imitation of Christ,” which itself suggests that practicing this faith involves the imitation of God and the imitation of God’s son.

Of course, God wants us to be like God—which likeness, which imitation, is another way to imagine repentance. Repentance, *metanoia*, the Greek original, meaning a wholeness of knowledge, a knowing God and a knowing what God knows, *-noia* is knowledge, and *meta-* is beyond, before, beneath, above. The sort of knowledge indicated in repentance is the sort of knowledge that enables us to be evermore like God.

Incidentally, *metanoia* is the thing to which Jesus had just prior to his time in the wilderness surrendered, and the thing to which he would leave the wilderness to reengage with as his central project. John had first spoken of it, John the Baptizer, who offered a baptism of repentance that the kingdom of heaven had come near.

And this, please remember, isn’t merely about confessing your sins. A baptism of repentance: this isn’t merely about admitting of all you’ve done wrong in life. It would well include that, but it’s also something far grander than that, not to mention far less self-centered than that. None of us is as so great in our sin that we outsize God in God’s grace and love. Repentance is about knowing this, trusting this, rejoicing in this, and making this your dwelling-place, your home.

Jesus would give himself to this baptism that John was offering, where it would be revealed that he was God’s son, the Beloved, with him God was well pleased.

From which he was then led into the wilderness, where he would be tempted by the devil. The *diabolo*: this means literally to cast through, or to separate or divide. He, this devil, this one who divides and splits off: he arrives in the wilderness after Jesus has fasted and subsisted. He

arrives without a sound, without indeed a body, which I imagine this not as an embodied entity at all, but a voice, a notion, one even internal to Jesus' own thinking.

Was he losing his mind?

That the division this "devil" manages is within Jesus' own self. A paranoia, if you will. A *para-noia*.

He has just learned he is the Son of God, the Beloved—which, if true, would mean mighty things for him. Power! Spectacular power.

What might he do with it?

There's possibly no limit to what all that might be. Turn stones to bread, feed a hungry world, which safe feeding makes hungry people your slaves, captive to your giving—or not, your withholding. Throw yourself off the Temple and dazzle the people, which dazzling makes captive the people as fans, as hangers on. He could join the power structures of the world! What's more, he could be the one on top!

So, God meant for his Messiah to be a witness against the power structures of the world.

So, God meant for his Son to be a victim of them. (Yeah, right!)

And that (God intended) he would then, resurrected, reveal God's aim for a whole other way, a new creation in which injustice is never claimed as justice, in which suffering is never thought to be justified or for a good reason, in which, no, the world is revealed as shot through with things not right and things we should not accept as God's will or "just the way it is," but things to be redeemed provisionally in this world by our work and our witness and perhaps even our suffering, and to be redeemed absolutely in the next world by God's amazing grace and healing love and eternal persistence to make things good.

So, God meant all that for him. So what? That didn't mean he had to do it. Because, of course, to do it meant he'd have to suffer the cross.

The cross.

On the other hand, he could go with the devil on this one, this voice that presents another way, the split off knowledge, the paranoia, that thinks it knows better. "God didn't say what you heard God say. This is what God said, something a little different, a little less than..."

Incidentally, the first word Jesus is remembered to have uttered upon returning from the wilderness is this: "Repent," as in *metanoia*, that one-ness of mind, that joining of the imagination with God's creative, redemptive imagination.

Just so, the serpent was lying. The serpent was trying to get the people not to imitate God by staying true to God's word but to imitate him by getting them to take him at his word—which Christian preaching has done down the centuries ever since. It drives me nuts—this persistently preached point, that we are *not* aim to be like God, indeed that we must *not* aim to be like God. No, please, let's all try to be a little *more* like God, a little *more* in communion with God!

Which means the prohibition that the people not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is about something else. And I think it's this: that God wants the people not to know evil.

But the woman trusted the wrong source, something I imagine we call relate to, trusting the wrong thing. So, she ate.

And then she gave it to the man to eat. And he ate.

And much is made of this, of course, that the woman was the one tempted and that she went on to be tempting, which says something damning about women. But it could just as easily suggest something damning about men. Consider, it took a supernatural force to trick a woman, something preexistent, something extrinsic to the otherwise ways of the garden. All it took to trick a man was someone his equal, or, according to some, someone inferior to him. So, who looks bad now?

This assuming, of course, that she intended to tempt and not simply to share.

Whichever it was that the story meant to suggest, it's not of particular interest to me. Both people were played, and by a thing they took to be their friend. They couldn't tell these two things apart—what's good and what's not good, which is our lot in life, too, no matter our gender. We get these two confused, knowing them just enough to have them tangled up in our judgment.

It's not for nothing, Jesus's urging his disciples to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. For we know. Now we know good and evil. It's time to get wise, should we manage such a thing.

Once, when the boys were young, we went to the city for a visit. We were playing in a park, and they found, behind a rock, obscured in some dirt, a syringe. Jesse and I were sitting on nearby bench watching them play. We almost missed their picking it up. We got there just in time to stop their grasping hands, a move so quick and startling it made them cry.

A week later, a trip to the pediatrician, they were due for vaccination, which had the clinician approach them with a syringe, and their eyes widened at this, they looked to me at this.

“No, this time it’s okay,” I said, likely with more ambiguity than was probably helpful. It’s exhausting.

It’s the first Sunday of Lent. It’s the beginning of a six-week season that leads to Holy Week and the cross, that leads ultimately to Easter.

This might have you “giving something up.” Our practice of this holy season has often come down to this, which is fine, a giving up of something that has been deemed “tempting.” Chocolate, alcohol, social media: I’ve heard of all sorts of things people will use these six weeks to discipline themselves in giving up, abstaining from. A practice, it’s not a declaration of the truth of such things. There’s nothing inherently evil about chocolate, or alcohol, or even social media. There’s nothing inherent in any of these things that would have them managing a separation of us from our God. It’s just a way for calling a person to a presence of mind, a practice even for being of one mind with God and with the truth that’s at work in all creation and beyond.

The truth: it’s in many ways a painful one, this truth. That there is something very wrong here, that there is something terribly wrong, tragically in need of redemption. And yet here is where it is good for us to be, ourselves in need of redemption, ourselves also a vessel for redemption.

Yet the only way to such victorious redemption is through—through this created order of beauty and tragedy, of rejoicing and suffering. Through, fully resilient amidst it *as it is*, (wise as serpents) yet also resistant of it (innocent as doves) resistant to it and its lies, which whisper resignation, cynical resignation: that thus it ever was and thus it shall ever be for thus does God intend it to be so if we can’t beat it we should join it. This is a lie. This is the tempter’s lie, a false choice.

Rather, a middle way, a third way: that we walk with God so for now and perhaps forever utterly and thoroughly together with God’s grace we shall redeem it.

For this, we follow Jesus now unto the cross.

Thanks be to God.