

“Created to Walk with God”

Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7, Matthew 4: 1-11

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As a woman, I have always struggled with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Even though I was raised a Baptist I never fully accepted the concepts of original sin or the fall. Perhaps I am bucking my heritage here. I believe that having been created in the likeness of God, human beings are inherently good. After all, we are told that God spent six days fashioning this incredible universe and after every creation pronounced it “good!” I believe humans may have even elicited a “very good.” So being sinful from the moment of our birth is a hard pill to swallow. I have experienced the story of Eve’s transgression in the garden used as a patriarchal weapon to keep women in their place and to blame her unnecessarily for all the evils that have befallen humankind. Therefore, in a strange way, I was delighted to see that on this first Sunday in Lent, we have the opportunity to wrestle with this iconic scripture and possibly come away with a new, more enlightened perspective on the text.

This morning we begin at the beginning, the start of human beings relationship with God and with each other. We hear the primal story of the first humans and their need to be in control of their own lives. Sheila Gustafson writes about the three gifts God gave to humans not the least of which is this idyllic Garden in which to dwell. First, God gives humans the gift of life itself, a gift so sacred and so valuable that we are to respect and treasure it always. God also gave humans the gift of other creatures and plants, setting in motion a complex ecosystem, and placing humans in the midst of this creation as stewards and caretakers of it.

Secondly, God gave humankind the gift of meaningful work. God made Adam and Eve caretakers of this creation. “God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it.” Although our work may not always seem like a gift, it is difficult to imagine one’s life without purpose, without the sense that we make a contribution.

Thirdly, God gave us the gift of freedom; freedom, that is, within limits. This is perhaps the most problematic of the three. There is something about human beings that does not accept the concept of limits. If there is a limit imposed there is a limit to be challenged. We observe this boundary testing behavior in children. Incessant boundary pushing and testing may be a sign of immaturity or of someone who has a problem with authority. Boundary testing, however, is something we all engage in at some time or another because it is a part of our human nature. What is it that makes it so compelling to test one’s limits or to disregard the need for them in the first place? Some may call it hubris or arrogance or narcissism. Call it whatever you wish, as stewards of God’s creation, God teaches us there are limits to our behaviors. Honoring these limits however, comes at a price.

This story, like the gospel story we heard this morning is about temptation. It is within our very DNA to tempt fate or to test one's limits. The writer David Lose says, "Here are Adam and Eve, living lives of peace and plenty in a garden created by God and given to them to till, tend, and enjoy. Yet even in this paradise they are incomplete, insufficient, and ultimately insecure. It is this insecurity that the serpent plays upon, calling into question the fundamental trustworthiness of God their creator. 'God has not told you everything,' the serpent suggests. 'Completeness, wholeness, self-sufficiency, mastery—these are within your grasp.' And by naming their incompleteness, the serpent makes it manifest, drawing their attention to their want, their lack, and their need like a dentist probes a cavity." It is not a female thing or a male thing, it is a human thing.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher spoke of the condition of being human as one, indeed of having a hole, what he called a "God shaped hole." He did not see this as a flaw but rather a way in which humans stay connected to their life giving relationship with God. Similarly, St. Augustine, the fourth century African bishop writes in the first line of his *Confessions* that God created restlessness in our hearts that can only be satisfied when we rest in God. It is the tempter's job, whether the serpent or Satan or the huckster on the television, to try to make us doubt God. As a result of these insecurities and doubts we move away from God.

What we hear in this story is perhaps not the origin of "original sin," but the beginning of "original insecurity." Most of us would rather forget about sin, let alone consider the concept of "original sin." Twenty first century, liberal Christians work hard to minimize any talk of sin. Such conversation conjures up long suppressed images of Bible waving, fire and brimstone, predicting preachers of the past. This concept of "original insecurity" seems a bit safer to consider. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve to overcome this original insecurity not through a relationship with God, but by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the very fruit they have been forbidden to eat. He assures Eve that she will not die if she eats this fruit, as she has been told.

When Eve finally succumbs to the serpents tempting, she does not die, however, she sees things differently. She is aware of her nakedness and senses this is not good. Having shared the forbidden fruit with Adam, they now feel compelled to cover themselves. The preacher Sheila Gustafson says, "The danger is, of course, that having eaten the fruit, having gained the knowledge, we are often not equipped to deal with the consequences of what we know, of what we are able to do, and with the devastating discovery that even with all the knowledge, we are still not in control of all the circumstances of our lives." We are not in control, but we can be in partnership.

We begin the season of Lent with confession. During Lent we often engage in a practice of daily *examen*, noticing the things that capture our attention, our priorities, and where we place our allegiance. I suspect that when we take time to look deeply and more intentionally at our lives, we are surprised by what we see. We can not escape this sense of original insecurity. This process of *examen* may help us discover when and with what

do we try to fill that God shaped hole within us. Then we can reestablish that connection with God in whom we truly find our rest.

“The PBS documentary series *Frontline* produced an episode a few years ago called “The Persuaders” that examined the evolution of modern advertising. In years past, advertisements boasted of the quality of the product. Not too long ago, they would seek celebrity endorsements. Today, however, advertisements make a promise less about the quality of a product and more about an imagined lifestyle that owning the product can somehow provide. By owning this kind of car, or using this kind of wineglass, advertisers suggest, we will discover our identity and move closer to having a meaningful life.

This sounds ludicrous, however, the documentary suggests that we are so starved for a sense of meaning and purpose that we buy things hoping the story they tell us is true; that we will feel less alone, less incomplete, and more whole if we simply buy their products. The stuff is not bad. It is that we expect too much from it. As one guest on the program says, ‘In the end it’s just a laptop or a pair of running shoes. They may be great, but they’re not actually going to fill those needs.’” (David Lose, “Into Temptation,” Sermon ideas for March 13, 2011)

As Christians, we know *who* we are and *whose* we are. As we hear in the gospel story, Jesus was able to stave off the tempter because he is sure of his identity as well. In our baptism we receive that essential identity as God’s beloved children. When we are secure in that identity, we are less likely to succumb to temptations that lead us away from God. That God hole within us is meant for the Holy Spirit, not more stuff that in the end can never satisfy. I am participating in the Carbon Fast during this Lenten season. It is a helpful discipline to be invited daily to unplug the unused appliances in my home or to remove a light bulb in one lamp for the season of Lent. It is good to take stock of my consumption and examine how my dependence upon these gadgets is clogging up that hole within my soul. It is good for us to remember that we live in community with all God’s creatures and no matter how far removed we are from the garden, we are still caretakers of all that God has created.

We are constantly tempted to serve other masters. It is an ongoing struggle to discern the voice of God among and above all the other competing voices. Lent offers a special invitation to name our insecurities, confess them and seek God’s assurance of grace. It is not a sign of weakness to admit our dependence on God. It is a sign of humility and gratitude to the one who created us in God’s own image and sets before us each day the ways of life and death. God was right, if we eat the fruit we will die, in order that we may truly live. That is the paradox of our faith. May it be so! Amen

Sources:

Sheila Gustafson, “Snake Bite,” Sermon for February 25, 1996, First Presbyterian Church, Santa Fe, NM.

David Lose, "Into Temptation," Notes on Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7, Working Preacher.org, March 10, 2011.