

## **"GOTTA GET BACK TO THE GARDEN"**

**Genesis 2:15-17**

**February 26, 2023**

Once a little boy picked up and opened the big, old family Bible. He looked through it with fascination, turning the old pages and enjoying the brilliantly painted pictures. Suddenly, something fell out of the Bible, and he picked it up and looked at it closely. It was an old leaf from a tree that had been pressed in between the pages. **"Momma, look what I found," the boy called out.**

"What have you got there, dear?" His mother asked.

**With astonishment in the young boy's voice, he answered: "I think it's Adam's Sunday suit!"**

There have been many books written using this story of Adam and Eve. Some are pure fantasy, others explore the theological implications, some attempt to prove the first couple's existence, and still others make it a basis for marriage counseling. There are other writings that explore the garden, the fiery sword, the concept of evil, and of course Satan.

Unfortunately, according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, the Adam and Eve story is one of the most misunderstood and abused passages in the whole of scripture. So much of how we view this passage comes from centuries of biased cultural interpretation that has distorted the message and the beauty and the tragedy of the story. For instance, there is no mention of a Fall or Original Sin. There is such a thing as sin and it does bring devastating results. Sin is something we all experience and struggle against. But did God consign humanity to a perpetual *state* of sin purely because some prehistoric ancestor pilfered a piece of prize fruit? That would make God rather petty and vindictive, don't you think?

Secondly, the snake is not the embodiment of evil or the devil. While the snake certainly manipulates and tempts the couple, he does not lie. Eating the fruit, which is not identified as an apple by the way, did not instantly kill the couple.

This story is certainly not told to blame women for the downfall of men. Unimaginable damage has been done to women over the centuries because some male theologians decided to read this text as proof that women are morally or intellectually inferior to men. For centuries they called women "the weaker sex," implying that, if only Adam had been around to keep a closer watch on his wayward wife the two of them never would have had to leave the garden. What nonsense and what tragedy has taken place for such an interpretation.

While we are at it, this passage has nothing to do with sex. This was a big idea in the early Christian church. It was popularized, especially, by one of the greatest theologians of all time, Bishop Augustine of Hippo who was dealing with his own personal demons. Why would a single bite out of a piece of fruit change God's intention for intimacy so completely? Adam and Eve are "ashamed," says the Genesis text. They're ashamed of their loss of innocence, and

the guilt of their disobedience. But they could not be ashamed of the physical relationship for which God has specifically created them.

My point is that this story should probably come with a warning label about reading too much into it. We need to see it with fresh eyes.

## I. 4 PART PLAY

So, if Genesis 2 and 3 are none of these things then what are they and what is the message intended for the hearers? It might help to think of these chapters as a 4-act play, albeit a brief play, but no less a well told one. The **Frist act** is the placement of man in the garden. **Second act** is forming a partner. **Third act** is the disruption in the Garden. **The last act** if the judgment and expulsion from the garden. This morning's scripture passages focus acts 1 and 3.

## II. PART 1 VOCATION, PERMISSION, AND PROHIBITION

**"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."**

Act 1 can be summed up in 3 words: **Vocation, Permission, and Prohibition.**

**Vocation** - God gives to the couple a purpose, namely, to work and keep the garden. This work is declared good. It is a share in God's creation. It means to guard and cultivate and protect the earth and its inhabitants. We could make a good argument for stewardship and environmental care based on this passage alone. The earth is not made for exploitation but cultivation. More importantly, work is not a curse, but a part of what makes us human.

**Permission** – The couple can eat freely from every tree in the garden. Taste and enjoy the fruit of your labors. The care of the garden also sustains and delights you. There is great freedom being offered here. By the way, the tree of life is not off limits either. Joy and blessing are gifts of God. Enjoy this life and world that I have made. This is a far cry from the stern restrictive God so many imagine.

**Prohibition** – However, there is one rule. The Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil serves as a boundary to remind the couple this is God's world. **It summons them to live in God's good, beautiful world on God's terms.** In doing so you will experience harmony, joy, wholeness. **OR** you can exercise your human autonomy and attempt to live in the world by your own power, a making of your own image. The results will be characterized by division, anxiety, and brokenness. This is a story of trust and obedience and there can be no real trust and obedience unless there is an option not to trust and obey.

In God's world humans are characterized by vocation, permission, and prohibition. When we hold these three together there is peace. Unfortunately, we tend to focus only on the prohibition and the divine vocation and freedom get lost and life gets out of balance.

### III. IT'S ABOUT POWER

The Garden Story is about power. What do Adam and Eve do that's so terrible? What's wrong with eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil. Isn't it a good thing that we know the difference between good and evil? Doesn't the acquisition of knowledge help us? Is God just keeping humanity in the dark?

The answer lies in that little phrase, "of good and evil." We're not talking ethics, here. God's not bent out of shape because Adam and Eve have developed an ethical sense. **God's angry because Adam and Eve are daring to put themselves in the judgment-seat of God.**

That's what "knowledge of good and evil" means. It's what a judge needs to know to weigh testimony in a courtroom. The Hebrew word **yada**, or knowledge, means more than mere cognitive knowledge. It also means an awareness of judgment, of justice. To pursue and claim the knowledge of good and evil means you're taking on the role of judge, a role that belongs to God alone.

If Adam and Eve aspire to gorge themselves on the fruit of that tree, it means they want to make themselves into little gods. It means they no longer have any need to revere their Creator. The serpent in the story has it exactly right. He explains to Eve that the reason God doesn't want her to bite into the fruit is because, if she and Adam do so, they **"will be like God."** This, of course, is the worst form of idolatry — the desire to assume for oneself the role of a god. Unfortunately, Eve and Adam buys it hook, line and sinker.

Yet isn't that what all of us seek to do, in large ways and small, each day of our lives? We turn from the God who created us. We believe we can go it alone in life. Use God as a back up in case things don't go our way. We too often work hard to convince ourselves that we know better than God, we're independent and we can chart our own course. The story is about idolatry and power.

### IV. IT'S ABOUT RATIONALIZATION

Thirdly, the Garden story is about rationalization. Rationalization is a defense mechanism in which people justify difficult or unacceptable feelings with seemingly logical reasons and explanations. For example, a student who is rejected from her dream college may explain that she's happy to be attending a school that's less competitive and more welcoming. Or after a divorce, a man may convince himself that his ex-wife wasn't up to his standards or that the split is a blessing in disguise so he can travel more. These explanations guard against difficult emotions, rejection, guilt, shame, and anger that challenge one's sense of self.

That's what Eve does, with respect to the fruit of the tree. Listen to what Eve concludes, **"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"**. Examine that verse carefully and you'll see three distinct rationalizations, why Eve thinks she can legitimately eat the fruit.

1. The tree is "good for food" — it's useful, in other words.
2. It's "a delight to the eyes" — the tree truly is beautiful.
3. The tree is "to be desired to make one wise" — it offers the tantalizing promise of wisdom.

In other words, Eve seeks from the tree *utility*, *beauty* and *wisdom*. These are good things, to be sure, but they lead her into sin. Yet isn't that always the way? It's not just the bad things that lead us astray; it's the *good* things or, at least, the things that seem to be good.

- "I'm not committing adultery; I'm just finding the love I need."
- "I'm not living a greedy lifestyle of over-consumption; I'm just pursuing the American dream."
- "I'm not hurting anybody when I cheat my customers; I'm just following the laws of the marketplace."
- "I'm not abusing my child; I'm just enforcing discipline."
- We can't come to worship, participate in a program, take time to prayer...fill in the blank.

It's interesting that technically, the serpent never does lie to Eve. Did you ever consider that? Every word out of his mouth is the truth. But the serpent fails to tell the *whole* truth. He slices off a carefully selected segment of truth, one calculated to impugn God's motives, and to puff his listeners up with self-destructive pride.

The very same thing is true of our own inner voices of temptation. Seldom are we tempted by the blatantly bad things of this world. It's evil masquerading as good that causes the most difficulty. That process by which we turn vice into virtue, in our minds, is called "rationalization." It's the same process Eve goes through as she ponders whether to disobey the Lord and bite into the forbidden fruit. When Eve manages to convince herself that the tree is useful, beautiful and a source of wisdom, then she's able to do what would otherwise be unthinkable. The story is about rationalization.

## V. IT'S ABOUT BLAME

Lastly, the Garden Story is about blame, which is also part of rationalization. If we move to **act 4** we discover everyone is blaming someone else. Adam blames both God and Eve, Eve blames the snake, and the snake doesn't say a thing because there is no one else on stage left to blame. But notice, no one apologizes, no one accepts responsibility, and no one confesses, they just pass the buck.

I believe we live in a society that loves the blame game. We love to blame the republicans, the democrats, the school board, my parents, and on and on and on. I'm not saying both groups and individuals don't have their faults. But I hear very few people step up and say it's my fault, my responsibility, my short coming, my lack of action, my indifference, my fear, my faithlessness, my sin. It's much easier to blame others.

In fact, I think we like the idea of blaming Adam and Eve for all the problems of the world so we can ignore our part. If only they had not eaten the fruit. The truth is, we have all eaten the fruit. We crossed the boundary of prohibition, we assume God's position, we have rationalized our bad decisions, and when it hasn't worked out we found someone else to blame. In the process we have lost track of the garden harmony, balance, and purpose of life.

Believe it or not, there is some good news here this morning. Thank goodness. Lent is about humbly coming clean, getting real and honest with ourselves: our cravings for power, our temptations, our easy rationalizations, and our tendency to blame others. When we enter Lent in this way we discover God's grace and experience the full effect it has on our souls. God did not give up on Adam and Eve, nor humanity. God opened a new way, a garden way if you

would have it, a new life through Christ. We just need to acknowledge that we can't get there on our own and trust the one who gave us a vocation, a promise, and a prohibition. Amen.

**First Presbyterian Church in Hawley**  
**Sunday, February 26, 2023**  
**Second Scripture Lesson**

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

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

<sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>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."

**3**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'?" <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>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.'" <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God.**