Lent 1—Year A
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 3. Oh, **Genesis 3**. Spoiler alert—this sermon is going to raise a whole lot more questions than it answers.

If you were to look this passage up in those bibles that give little headings to each section, what would the heading for this section be? *The Fall*.

And precisely what **kind of fruit** would have caused that fall? *An apple.*

And **who tempted Eve** to eat this fruit? *Satan* or *the serpent who is Satan.*

And **according to Eve**, what was the **actual command that God gave** concerning this fruit? *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.*

And just **who**, actually, **heard the original command** from God? *Adam.*

And what was the **actual command that Adam received** from God? *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.*

So, how did the command *not to eat*, get **expanded** to *you can't eat it or touch it*? And can we just note that **when the actual command was given, Eve wasn't created yet**—just saying. This was a solo **Adam** conversation. So **who's *really* at fault here**? **Who's to blame**? ***We always want to know who's to blame.***

It's true, the **blame game** starts early. It's right there in **Genesis 3**. **After they've eaten the fruit**, **their eyes are opened**, and they **see that they're naked**, and they **sew together fig leaves for clothes**, and then when **God comes walking in the garden in the cool of the day, the man and the woman hid themselves from God's presence. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" And the man said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was *afraid*, because I was *naked*; and I *hid* myself."**

You can just hear **God** saying, ***"Oh man, who told you were naked. Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"***

And what does **Adam** do? "*She made me do it! Actually God, this is **your** fault.* **The woman whom *you* gave me to be with me, she gave me the fruit, and I ate."**

And **God turns to Eve**, **"What is this you have done?"**

"Well, God, the *serpent* deceived me, and I ate."

Then **God turned to the serpent**, **"Cursed are you above all cattle, and all wild animals; upon your belly, you shall go, and you'll be eating dust."**

And we know the rest:

- **Enmity between the serpent and the woman, and all their descendants.**
- **Pain in childbearing and the man ruling over the woman.**
- **The ground gets cursed**—what did the poor ground do?
- And **the man will have to toil, lots of toil, to eat anything out of the ground.**
- **God taps his inner seamstress** and **makes garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothes them.**
- *And*, **God determines that because the man has become like one of them, knowing good and evil, lest [the man] then take and eat also from the tree of life and live forever**, well, better to **send him forth from the garden, complete with cherubim and flaming swords to guard the way to the tree of life.**

Whew, there is a lot here. Such a potent story; such a potent **myth**, and I don't mean myth in negative, less-than-real kind of way. **Myths are powerful**; **myths shape imagination**; **myths shape belief and action**; and **these kind of primordial myths, even more so**. And ***this* myth**, this one has had **staying power**, and it's so hard to tease out **what the text actually says** *from* **what we've been told it says** through interpretations over the last several millennia.

So, let's try to **release some of those old, but not really accurate, understandings** and do some serious **theological reclamation**, and here, I am indebted to Professor Shawna Dolansky's article *The Immortal Myth of Adam and Eve*[i]. So…

- The notion of **The Fall** and the **doctrine of original sin** is a ***later* interpretation**, which **really takes on steam, first with Bishop Irenaeus in the 2nd century**, and then blessed **Augustine**. In fact, **the word "sin" doesn't even occur in the Hebrew bible until chapter 4 (we're still in chapter 3)**.
- The **notion of the devil and Satan is a much *later* concept**, **not even present when Genesis was written**.
- The **fruit being identified as an apple** is a **translation fluke** from the **Latin *malum* which is "evil" in the adjective form, but "apple" in the noun form**. The medieval interpreters thought of **this forbidden fruit as evil**, **hence an apple**. But **the fruit isn't ever named**.
- And the **serpent originally stood upright and apparently talked**, not the forever misunderstood and feared reptile we have come to know.
- In Dolansky's article alone, I count no less than **12 different interpretations of this passage**, at least 4 ways that it got unpacked in the Jewish tradition and 8 more ways it got unpacked in the Christian tradition, **which is all really great news because it means that we get a crack at it too**. Don't let anyone tell you there is only one way to go with this passage. That's not how biblical texts work, and it's especially not how these origin story myths work.

And we have to engage with **reclaiming this text** because it has **done so much damage to women, who have borne the blame**, to the **earth**, which **got cursed**, to **desire**, which was deemed as **dangerous and evil**, to **poor snakes**, who actually **do still terrify me**, and to **our whole understanding of humanity** and the **whole enterprise of what God's doing**. So much has been laid at the feet of this passage. For instance, **because of this one choice, humanity is utterly depraved and in need of redemption**. I do think **humanity *is* in need of salvation**, but **not because we utterly depraved**, ***but rather, because we so need to be healed and made whole.***

There are so many forces at play in this passage. **Hope** and **longing** and **desire** and **freedom** and **agency** and **loss** and **grief**. And **no one is immune—not the woman, not the man, not the serpent, not God**.

It's so interesting, but **the serpent is NOT incorrect in anything that the serpent says to the woman**. Ultimately, **the woman and man ate of the fruit and *didn't* die**, at least not in a conventional sense. Their sense of **innocence died**. **Living free of shame** in our human mortal fallible limited flesh **died**. A **life free of conflict** and **toil died**. But it **didn't go down like they, and we, were led to believe when God gave that command to Adam**.

And **why did the woman ultimately eat that fruit?** It **wasn't really because the serpent deceived her**. Oh, **the serpent may have prompted her to question what she was told**—thank goodness that **humanity developed that trait**—but ultimately, **she eats the fruit because she saw that the tree was good for food, and a delight to the eyes, and desired to make one wise. *She ate because of her desire for good things.***

And this was **the gamble that God made when God created us in first place** and **planted desire** and **longing at the heart of our beings**. ***You give a person desire, you give a person freedom, you give a person choice and agency, then you give up control***. In **God's heart of hearts**, **God wanted it this way because true love can *never* be coerced, *only* chosen, and you can only choose if you have the *freedom* to *choose* or *not choose***.

But this little story in **Genesis 3** indicates that **this was not, and would not, be an easy go *for God***. **God gave humanity a choice, and we didn't choose the path God hoped we would.** We **opted for a path of growth** and **wisdom** and **doing the work**, **instead of the childlike bliss** of **innocence** and **being completely taken care of**. That's why some call this a **fall upward**—*mythologically speaking*, this is **the dawning of human consciousness and awareness**. And **with this capacity to be aware and conscious *comes the awareness of our alienation and separation***.

In some ways, **God wanted to spare us this**, and that's why **God sends us on our way before we can eat of the tree of life and live forever with this pained awareness of our separation from God** and **one another** and that **hard shame that whispers "you blew it and you don't belong anymore."** *From this point of view*, **the whole rest of the story isn't to redeem our depraved natures BUT to heal the wound of our original estrangement, our sense of separation, and the belief that God was always out to get us**. **God** *isn't* just waiting to drop the hammer on us, but is **determined to restore us and reconnect us to the whole**.

"God hates nothing God has made"—we heard this on **Ash Wednesday**. *Right from the beginning*, **humanity has wrestled with this—do we really believe this?**

- **What is the story we tell ourselves about this formative encounter we see in Genesis 3?**
- How does it **form how we understand our most intimate relationships with one another** and **with God** and **with other creatures** and **creation itself?**
- What are our **take-aways** about how **power is shared** or **deployed?**
- How do we **understand our freedom to choose** and the **cost of those choices?**
- How do we **understand our loss of control** when we **honor others' freedom to choose?**
- And how do we **name** and **honor the loss** and **grief** that **sometimes come when the choices of others don't unfold as we would have hoped?**
- How do we **steward this freedom we've been given** and how **do we ground it in a deeper place beyond those places** that **our false self finds so satisfying?**
- How do we **go to the Source of desire**, and **not settle for power and control**, **esteem and affection**, **safety and security and survival?**
- Isn't this precisely the territory that **Jesus has to work through and work out in the temptation story** this morning?

- **What does it mean** to **be the Son of God**—that's where **the tempter is pressing him.**
- **For us**, it's **what does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?**
- How will we **choose to act within the glorious freedom** and **incredible capacities** with **which we've been blessed?**
- **Which fruit will we choose to take and eat**, and **which will we leave behind**, and **what will be the ripple effects of those choices for millennia to come?**

These **aren't easy questions**, and who knew that **so much was wrapped up in this one little story**, but **such is the way of the bible and such is the way of Lent**. **Instead of wishing Genesis 3 away** for all the trouble it has caused so many, and so much trouble it has caused, maybe our **invitation** on this **First Sunday in Lent** is to **engage it *fully***, **unpack *all* the layers of this text**, let **it take us into the deep waters**, and ***know that in going back to the beginning, we can begin again***. Amen.

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[i] The Immortal Myth of Adam and Eve by Professor Shawna Dolansky