

Temptation and Blame  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-5, 6-13, 22-23; Matthew 4:1-11

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Original Sin. The Fall. These are the headings in many Bibles above the second account of Creation in Genesis, often called the story of Adam and Eve. This morning, I invite you to set aside past conceptions of the Garden of Eden story, to make room for the beauty often missed. Yes, the account offers an explanation for human sin and introduces the reality of death, but these have cast a dark shadow over an intimacy between God and God's created human creatures.

Before we hear our lesson, I have pondered what it says that many of us own or use devices that have an image of a fruit from which a bite has been taken? Does this point to a succumbing to original sin temptations? Those old enough, recall some of that same company's early computers named the fruit: Macintosh.

Well, if any feel any guilt in biting on the apple – and I fully expect none do! – we are wise to note the fruit is never identified as an apple in the Garden of Eden story, nor is the word “sin” used, much less “original sin.” Such are the theological layers that have been placed onto the story. I think as we peel off some of these layers, we can reclaim the Garden story as a creation story, rooted as much in God's goodness, as God's judgment. Without dismissing the reality of evil, may we hear in this second creation account as an expression of God's desire to be in relationship with humanity, and not just the account of its fall.

Our Hebrew Scripture reading includes portions of the second story of Creation, in Genesis, chapters 2 and 3:

*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.*

*They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'*

*Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever'— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.*

It is temptation morning. Each first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary includes one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, just after his baptism by John. It is key to remember, both the temptation in the garden and the wilderness take place within the realm and authority of God. We do not have a free wielding separate power of evil slithering into the garden or hovering in the wilderness Jesus is about to enter.

The serpent of Genesis was a part of God's creation, one of God's creatures, though as stated, the most crafty of all the wild animals. In all Gospel accounts of Jesus' temptation, the same Spirit that descended on Jesus to bless him at his baptism, also leads him into the wilderness, to be tempted.

We will hear Jesus' temptation in a different way this morning. I will read each temptation, and then we will sing a verse of "Jesus Was Tempted in the Desert" to hear Jesus' responses, each a quote from the book of Deuteronomy. The fourth verse is a prayer for us when we face temptation.

*Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. <sup>2</sup> After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."*

**Response: v. 1 of "Jesus Tempted in the Desert"**

*<sup>5</sup> After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, <sup>6</sup> "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."*

**Response: v. 2 of "Jesus Tempted in the Desert"**

*<sup>8</sup> Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."*

**Response: v. 3 of "Jesus Tempted in the Desert"**

*<sup>11</sup> The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.*

**Response: v. 4 of "Jesus Tempted in the Desert"**

Now let's go back to the Garden of Eden. Think of what God had done before the tempter serpent enters: God formed Adam and Eve, God breathed life into them, God planted, God placed, God made, God took, God commanded. God is active, and God's actions are how we know about God. [Brueggemann, Walter, in Texts for Preaching, Year A, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1995), p. 184]

God placed the human in the garden of Eden to till and keep it, and then God offered the freedom to eat of all but one of the trees in that garden. So, the story begins with God giving human beings purpose and meaning. In exchange for caring for the garden, the garden will care for the human.

In contrast, we have the serpent, who has no actions, just talk, just words. Again, the serpent is described as crafty. We might use the term hustler. As such, I hear the temptation less about committing some mortal or original sin, and more about the humans falling for a good line, slick talk, after having received the gracious gift of an active God.

The serpent's talk offers enticements to draw the humans away from the faithful speech and action of God, their trust in God, and their willingness to observe limits God has set. "You won't die if you eat that fruit," says the serpent. We know that strategy: create options in a creative way, play on your audience's desires or fears, and thus portray the intentions of God as silly rules, only meant to uphold God's ego, power and control. The serpent says, "There's a reason God does not want you to eat from that tree, but that reason does not benefit you."

The talk of the serpent is individually focused. The hustle is on, and like a good advertisement, it plays on the appeal of personal rights, individual desires, and that slippery voice that seeks to build us up by telling us what we deserve. "God does not know what is best for you," the serpent suggests. "I know what's best for you," the serpent thinks, but is wise or crafty enough not to say out loud; instead, the serpent implies, "You know what is best, what is good for you," adding, "and by the way, doesn't that fruit look delicious?"

As one has written, the "...freedom to determine for ourselves 'good and evil' appears enlightened and liberating." [McSween, Allen Jr., Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010), p. 28.] It is also enticing, and can easily lead us to say, not only "I know what's best for me," but what the serpent thought, "I know what's best for you."

"I know what's best for you." It is part of the balancing act of parenting, as children move from infancy to adolescence to maturity, with limits set and removed each step of the way.

"I know what's best for you." It is the controlling ways of people over other people, in work, at school, and even in marital relationships.

"I know what's best for you." It is an approach to caring for others, which can cause, as social conservatives remind social progressives, a perpetuating dependence rather than liberation, or what is sometimes called, the "nanny state."

Likewise, social conservatives seek to restrain the rights of others based on imposing their personal morality on all, also under the guise of "I know what's best for you."

The problem is, my “I know what is best for you,” is most often filtered through what works best for me. That is what I hear in the temptation in the garden. The serpent stands against the trust, obedience, and intimacy built into God’s creation. The temptation sought to erode the trust of the humans in God, by luring them toward personal desire – “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.” The result for both the man and woman is estrangement, as occurs when we act only on personal desire.

A quick note on blame. The man points the finger at the woman when asked what happened, and the woman extends it to the serpent. While there are sometimes clear cut situations in which one party is to blame, it is very easy to remove ourselves from involvement, create excuses, play the innocence card, and dismiss our own responsibility. Diverting blame can be a time consuming game that also enhances estrangement. We see this prevalent in politics. Identifying and admitting responsibility and wrongdoing instills trust, and allows grace to flow.

I find our two lessons linked, not by the persona of evil in either the garden’s serpent or Jesus’ tempter, but by the temptation offered to resist, move away from, or estrange oneself from the greater purposes of God. In the Garden of Eden, the humans said “yes” to the temptation. In the wilderness, Jesus said “no.”

I often delight in the first story of creation, the glorious account of the six days each being declared good, followed by God creating a Sabbath day of rest. It also helps me avoid the Garden of Eden story because of all the bad theology layered upon it. Yet, again, when I take time to remove the layers, I find an intimacy in the garden, where humanity is placed and given purpose. In the Garden, we hear the footsteps of God, which while causing fear for Adam, also showed him a God with boots on the ground, a God who desires and is willing to come close. “Where are you?” I hear God asking this more with parental care than holy judgment. So, too, Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, with feet planted on the earth.

In his new Lenten devotional, *A Way Other Than Our Own*, Walter Brueggemann wrote of two voices related to Jesus’ temptation. “There is the assuring voice of God, which says, ‘I will protect and I will answer and I will deliver.’ That voice, however, is countered by a second voice that mocks and seduces men and women of faith, making easy promises, issuing facile invitations, urging acts that are against our faith and our identity. Lent [can be] a time for learning how to listen to the voices of promise and seduction, and decide how to adjudicate them; and to hear better the true voice of assurance and to notice quickly the seductive voice of unfaith...” [Brueggemann, Walter, *A Way Other Than Our Own*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), p. 8]

Within us, perhaps as a knot in our stomach, or an uneasy tension we cannot shed, we have built-in alarms that alert us, “This is not the path I am to walk, this is not the fruit I am to eat, this is not what or who I am to worship.” When we attend to that alarm, we have identified temptation to be shunned, and opened ourselves to hear the gracious voice of a God who continues to walk with us in the gardens of our lives.