

Rev. Camille Cook Howe  
The Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
Lent 1

February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7  
Who will you listen to?

*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.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.



A common trajectory for biblical studies of the young Christian is that first we learn the Bible stories as historical events. God created the earth in seven days. Eve was created from the rib of Adam. Noah built an ark, and we have the dimensions. Then, after a while the Christian wrestles with the historicity of the texts, did they really happen, is it all factual? If it did not really happen just how we thought it happened, then can it be true? Is any of it true? We move from faith and acceptance onto disbelief and doubt. Eventually with enough wrestling we return to belief. We realize it is true but in more complicated and beautiful ways than we initially thought and that our feeble minds will ever fully comprehend. As we return to belief, we learn to treat the texts with sacred respect. We treat them as the inspired writings of God's revelation to humanity instead of as just Christian history books.

Today's story from Genesis is one of the earliest texts the reader confronts when they open the Bible. This familiar story needs careful examination and to be treated with respect and humility. It is the creation story of Adam and Eve, placed by God in the garden of Eden. In this story, the humans are given by God, a vocation to till the earth, they are given freedom to do many things, and they are given a boundary to know their limitations. Life is good. Then the serpent appears. Cunning and manipulative, the serpent raises questions and ideas for the humans. The serpent talks only twice. *'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"'* and *"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."*

Theologian Walter Brueggemann says, “The serpent makes God’s speech in the garden doubtful and negotiable. The wily speech of the serpent creates options for the human creature outside the options God has voiced and authorized.” God said, “Don’t eat from this tree or you will die.” The serpent said, “Try it, what’s the worst that could happen?” Oh, I don’t know...the death of innocence, or alienation from the divine parent, or just a life of constant striving to forever try to recreate the experience of Eden. Weighing up the choices, the humans decided not to listen to God. They listened to the other voice.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “God drew a line in the garden of Eden and said, “Humans beings on this side, God on this side. Tree of life on your side, tree of the knowledge of good and evil on my side. Stay on your own side of the line...” Humans struggle with that boundary, yet the boundary was meant to protect us. With the boundary, life was good. Without the boundary, life was chaos.

Adam and Eve and the crafty serpent: “Did this story really happen,” the biblical student asks? It happens all the time. This story is not just about something that happened a long, long time ago – this story is about how things are right now. It is a description of how God is, and how we behave, and the condition of the world. It is not history. It is existential. This is a description of our reality – that God is good, and people are flawed, and creation is messed up! Is it true? It absolutely is true. Because every day God offers us lives of meaning and purpose with boundaries, so that we know that they are the humans and God is God. And every day people listen to other voices and go in different directions and mess things up – every day we try to cross to the other side of the line. Of course, it is true!

If this was the end of the story, if it ended with us being kicked out of the garden, to spend the rest of our lives wandering out somewhere east of Eden, then there really would be no meaning at all. All really would be lost. God told us what to do and we decided a snake knew better. We blew it. End of story.

But of course, it isn't the end but the beginning of the Christian metanarrative leading towards ultimate redemption. We know that the same cunning and manipulative voice appeared in the gospel story. Jesus was out in the wilderness, and this same voice called out to him, trying to seduce him, trying to confuse him, trying to get him to turn away. But Jesus never crossed to the other side of the line. Jesus knew that it was his calling to listen for God's voice and even more importantly, to ignore the other voices. Jesus emerges from the wilderness, famished but victorious thereby offering humanity a different ending.

The fall of man, the story of Adam and Eve, is instructive in every age. We hear it today as we begin our journey of Lent and remember just why it is we needed a Savior. We are called to listen to the voice of Christ who says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Jesus says, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” “I am the light of world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Jesus’s message is incredibly different and life changing – Jesus offers the world light and love and hope. Will we listen to Jesus and follow? Or will we listen to the snake?

- The snake says life is meaningless, you should be depressed.
- The snake says your loved one has died; you should grieve forever.
- The snake says the world is getting darker, scarier, harder; you should be anxious.
- The snake says beauty is skin deep; you should get a facelift or a spray tan.

- The snake says your life is inferior to others; you should be self-conscious.
- The snake says you are going to run out of the things you need to be okay; you should be afraid.
- The snake says God doesn't care if you worship, serve, or follow; you should be free.
- The snake says come over to my side of the line – things are better over here, easier, lighter, carefree.

The snake is a liar...lies, seductive, tempting, empty lies!

If only, we could be more like Jesus in the wilderness who rebuffed the devil with a command, "Away with you, Satan!" Or like my favorite bumper sticker says, "Not today, Satan."

Not today will I let you rob my life of meaning.

Not today will I let you steal my peace.

Not today will you take away my hope for the future.

Not today will I let you tempt me with fleeting pleasures.

Not today will I abandon the God who created me.



We have to decide who we will listen to and who we will follow.

I have been thinking about what we need to learn from this metanarrative about the struggles of humanity, in 2023 in Washington, D.C. It is a narrative about listening to the wrong voices and going down the wrong paths, turning from the path of God. There is so much about this story that we still need to study and know and learn.

The Washington Post had an article last week titled, *The Crisis in American girlhood*, about the mental health issues plaguing our society. It listed the things which have robbed these children of their youthfulness, their joy, their foundations, their health, their innocence. Snakes are out there. And we are learning about how those updated versions of the garden variation of snakes are finding their ways into the hearts and minds and souls of the children and the youth and it is devastating. If only it were just the children or just the girls. All of us are confronted with snakes every single day. All of us are tempted to take bites out of poisonous apples, which will lead us away from God.

Social media is a snake that tells everyone they are not enough. The news is a snake that tells everyone the world is terrifying. The culture at large is a snake that tells us there is no God. If I am not enough and the world is terrifying and there is no God then I am 100% an anxious, hopeless, dispirited mess. But there is another voice. Jesus says, “You are enough, you are loved, you are called.” In this ending, the terror and heartache of this world are being redeemed. In this ending, death is not the final chapter for creation. In this ending, the relationship between Creator and creation is being restored.

We don't have to listen the snakes. The snakes can be ignored. The snakes can be rejected. The snakes can be caged. We don't have to eat the poisonous apples. God still small voice is out there, offering us a new way of life. The Psalmist writes, “Taste and see that God is good.” May we be wise enough to hear God, open enough to trust God, and courageous enough to follow God...all the way to the end of the story – redemption. Amen.