

February 26, 2023. Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. God of grace, help us seek you and the message you intend for us today. Let us not be distracted by worldly pursuits or pleasures. Help us to focus our hearts and minds on you and your Word read and proclaimed today. Amen.

Our Scripture for this morning comes from Genesis, chapter 2, verses 15 to 17, and chapter 3, verses 1 through 7. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ 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?’” ² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ 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.’ ” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die, ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.**

This past Wednesday, we celebrated Ash Wednesday. Our service that evening, with the imposition of ashes as a reminder of our mortality, marked the beginning of the Lenten Season.

The Lenten season is a time of preparation. Christ’s violent death at the hands of humanity on the cross is coming, his resurrection is coming, and we must prepare ourselves and each other.

We do so through prayer, reflection, spiritual disciplines, and other practices to discern that which separates us from God. Because ultimately, to live in Christ, we must die in Christ. Throughout lent we are charged to discern the parts of ourselves that separate us from God. The parts that need to die to have new life with Christ.

The first Sunday of Lent begins with the story of Christ going into the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted by the Devil. Through temptation, the Devil tries to separate Christ from God, but he resists.

So as Christ has his own temptations in the wilderness, humanity has its own temptations in the garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden is a common story we are taught since childhood. It's a powerful story, too, because we only interpret it one way. From the early years of Christianity, this story has been interpreted as the origin of sin and the fall of humanity – grounded in the fact that Adam and Eve did not resist temptation and disobeyed God when they ate that fruit and were punished and forced to leave paradise.

But from that interpretation we have come to accept many things in this story as fact, when really, they are just assumption. Maybe correct assumptions and interpretations, but I think it's important, first, to look at what the text says solely on its own.

First – it's important to note that humanity is created for a very specific purpose. We are not the height of creation – God needed someone to till and keep the Earth, so God created Adam. In fact – those verbs (to till and to keep) are more accurately translated as to serve and to protect or preserve. We were created to serve the Earth, not the other way around. So even in paradise, they did work that had purpose and meaning.

Next, is that the serpent is not Satan who invades the Garden bringing evil in. The first verse of Chapter 3 tells us plainly that the serpent was among the creatures God created in the Garden. As Dennis Olson writes, “the serpent is one of God's own creatures who simply poses some questions and alternative explanations concerning God's motivations in creation for the humans to consider. there was something already in the human that resonated to the hermeneutics of suspicion that the serpent offered as one option for interpreting the words and actions of God.”

And finally – the word sin is never mentioned in the whole narrative of the story. And while I think it is a faithful interpretation to see sin in this story - it's important to realize that it is never stated so explicitly. Neither is the word punishment.

But with all of that in mind – what does this story have to say to us on this first Sunday of Lent? What does it say to us as Christ is in the wilderness being tempted by the devil?

Perhaps the answer lies not in temptation but the result of that temptation. Eve and Adam were tempted to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge and good and evil. We don't exactly know what that means – knowledge of Good and evil – the tree is not mentioned anywhere else in scripture.

But when they ate that fruit, their relationship with God was broken. They immediately were ashamed of who they are, their nakedness, they are ashamed of how God created them, so they cover up that creation.

The God who created the beautiful Eden also created them with beautiful purpose – and yet they are ashamed.

Shame separates us from God. Specifically shame at the body the Lord gave us. That's really a message that we need to hear over and over again because we live in a culture that says over and over again that we should be ashamed of the body God gave us.

Fear separates us from God. When we are afraid of God's presence, we draw away, we hide. We separate ourselves from God.

But the biggest thing that breaks that relationship is their disobedience. God gave them purpose and freedom, but with limitations. Limitations that were for their own good. But that wasn't enough. So, they ate the fruit – choosing their own will over God's – and broke the trust between them.

And from there, there is no going back. The picture-perfect paradise of Eden is broken, and death enters the garden. Born out the humanity's desire for more that, when abused, breaks our relationship with God.

They leave Eden. But they leave together, and they leave still with their God given purpose to serve and protect Earth. This work is much harder outside the garden, but it is still the work that God created them for. The work that allows participate in God's creation.

Perhaps sin is best understood as anything that separates us from God. In this story, God resides in Eden, and the human's actions lead them out of that garden – separated from God. In a season where we reflect on what separates us from God – this story has a lot to offer.

I come to this story with curiosity. Each time I read it; it only pokes more questions. It only challenges the interpretation I for so long believed as fact.

Maybe to contrary belief, I think Lent is a time to be curious. It's a time to look around with curiosity – both outwardly and inwardly – to see what truly separates us from God, not just what we've been told separates us from God. Because the devil was not in that Garden – only the things God had created. Thus, there is something within the very nature of who we are that drives us from God.

At the heart of lent is death. Lent leads to death. The decisions Adam and Eve made in that garden lead to death. Not on the very day they ate the fruit as God tells them, but death becomes part of their world moving forward.

When God sends Adam and Eve out of the Garden, God says that they have “become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” Their desire to be like God separates them from God. But in the first chapter of Genesis, God created humanity in God's image.

The image of God within us, the image we were created in, leads us to God, when we corrupt that image to be like God, that's when we separate ourselves from God. That is what leads to death.

At the heart of lent is death. But from that death comes resurrection. Comes new life in Christ. Comes reconciliation.

When Christ incarnate comes to us fully human – he does so, so that we might see and know God in a way we can understand. But the fully human, fully divine Christ comes to us also so that we can see what is divine already within us. We see that in the life that Christ lived. How he loved, how he sought out those who were different from him, those who society said were not worthy, how he worked for justice, how he loved the earth.

We have the ability to follow the footsteps of his life, to do this work – that is what is divine with us. That is what leads us back to God.

Temptation is part of God's created world, part of who we are. It's not temptation that is sin – it is what results from the decisions we make because of temptation. Christ in the wilderness did not sin because he did not act on the devil's temptations. So, the temptation that was designed to separate him God, only brought him closer.

Adam and Eve's actions from temptation led them away from God – but in the world they entered after leaving Eden still gave them a way back to God. They still had their purpose God created them with. As we prepare for the cross this Lenten season, we are charged with curiosity to see what within us needs to die on the cross. Adam and Eve challenge us to look deeper, to look beyond temptation, to seek that answer. To be able to do so with curiosity and wonder, too, is divine.

And for that, thanks be to God.

Amen.