

February 26th, 2023
1st Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 “Putting Sin in its Rightful Place”

Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent! The theme for our Lenten Season this year is, “Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith.” We got started with Lent a little early this year by talking about what it means to develop a deeper, richer spiritual life. We learned that it’s an ongoing process that involves opening up space in our minds, hearts and bodies. It takes practice. It’s not easy. And it’s not a “one and done” thing either. You can’t take short cuts. It involves letting go. And not just “letting go of *things*” like we sometimes do during Lenten season. It involves letting go of even the expectations that we have of what a spiritual experience *should* be. So, consider yourselves prepped. Now we get to put what we learned into practice. That’s what Lenten season is about. The great thing about “letting go” is that it puts us into a position of seeking and listening. I had two choices of scriptures this week that are both related to seeking and listening. I chose Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness for Thursday night Bible study. That left us with the story of Adam and Eve’s temptation for this morning.

I’m going to say something about this story in Genesis that’s going to sound controversial. When you ask most people what the story is about, they’ll say something like, “God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the serpent cornered Eve, lied to her, got her to eat the fruit. Then she went and told the same lie to Adam and got him to eat it too. God found out and they were exiled from Eden.” Does that sound about right? For the most part it is. Except the serpent didn’t lie to Eve. That’s where you’re supposed to say, “What do you mean, pastor? Of course the serpent lied to her! That’s what serpents do! That’s what the devil does!” But that simply isn’t the case here in this story. What’s true is that the serpent was crafty. He’s a trickster. And he definitely wanted them to fail and disobey God. But he did not lie. He said, “Your eyes will be opened,

and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” And that’s exactly what happened. And that’s what led to their exile from Eden.

No, Jesse! That’s not the way it works! Don’t you remember Flip Wilson? Now for those of you who don’t know, Flip Wilson was a stand-up comedian from the 1960s and 70s whose famous line was, “The devil made me do it.” He’d do something wrong, get caught, and when he was told to explain, he’d say, “The devil made me do it.” The truth of the matter is that the devil doesn’t *make* us do *anything*. We are champions at getting into trouble all on our own. We don’t need a “devil” do blame things on and yet we do. Did the serpent *tempt* Eve? Oh, for sure. But again, the serpent didn’t lie. Let’s read it again –

[The serpent] 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.’”

No lies here so far. The serpent was just asking for clarification. “Hey, did God say that you *can’t* eat from any of the trees here in this garden?” Eve said, “Oh, no. In fact we *can* eat from any tree in the garden. Just not the one in the middle. We were told ‘don’t even touch it, or you’ll die.’” Back to the text -

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.’

A-hah! There it is. The serpent lied. He said, “You will not die!” Yeah, but did she die? Did Adam die? Sure, eventually. But they didn’t die there on the spot. They didn’t die when they ate the fruit. Something else died though, but we’ll talk about that in a bit. The serpent also said that their eyes would be opened and that they’d be like

God in that they would know good and evil. That's exactly what happened, so no lie there either. Okay, back to the text -

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.

And then when you keep reading past where Gary stopped, we learn about God confronting Adam and Eve about this. God said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" That's when all the shame and blame started. Adam said, "It wasn't me, it was that woman you gave me! She made me do it!" Then Eve said, "No, it wasn't me, it was that snake! He made me do it!" And that's where Flip Wilson got his joke. But again, nobody made anybody do anything. As autonomous human beings who are gifted with the power of free agency ... who are gifted with the ability to choose, we can say "no" to anything at any time. We can even say "no" to serpents who say, "Wouldn't it be great to eat that fruit?" *We* are the ones who are responsible for our decisions. And that leads us to the question we have on the table this week - "In our lives, where we must make moral choices every day, how do we allow wisdom to guide the decisions we make?" Or maybe another way to frame that is, "How do we allow God's voice to be louder than the voice of the conniving serpents in our lives?" And related to that is the question, "Who and what are the conniving serpents in our lives?"

That's the trickier question because then we have to start evaluating where we get our information. No doubt, we're hungry for the fruit of knowledge, but when it's time to grab some, which tree are we going to choose? What sources do we seek for news, information, and entertainment? Whose voices—and what messages—take up too much

space in our heads? From the onslaught of messaging we receive, we are invited to choose carefully. Faith practices and spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting can help us listen and filter what we're hearing so we can discern God's voice from others. Faith practices and spiritual disciplines help us get in touch with that inner moral compass that is accessible to all of us. And guess what we get to do during Lenten season?

The serpent said, "God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened." Again, the serpent didn't lie—because Adam and Eve's eyes *did* open. But what about what God said? God said, "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." But again, the humans did not physically die on the spot as they imagined. But God did tell the truth: A death would happen. It was the death of their innocence. They realized they were naked. They were ashamed. And they tried to hide from God. And they were forced to leave their Divine Parent's house. Before we can live a life of wisdom, we must allow our naive innocence to die. This call to grow up and leave our Divine Parent's house comes for all of us. And it is painful. But it's also necessary. It's what we inherit. Kind of a different way of framing "original sin" isn't it?

As we jump ahead in scripture we discover that this same choice came to Jesus as he wandered the wilderness for 40 days to prepare for his earthly ministry. This is why Lent is 40 days long. It's supposed to represent our time in the wilderness. And you may look at a calendar and say, "Wait, it's 46 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter." That's because we get to break our Lenten fast on Sundays. When Jesus was in the wilderness the tempter tried to get Jesus to use his divine gifts as a parlor trick. He was given choices – Will he use his gifts for fame or use them for peace? Will he use his power for domination or for justice? Jesus shows us the way by resisting temptation *every time*.

And as he does so, he teaches us what we all need to know as we stumble around seeking wisdom outside of Eden. When Jesus refused to turn bread into stone, it's because he knew his gifts and abilities were to be in service to something far greater than hunger. When he refused to test God, it's because he already trusted God. And when he refused the kind of loyalty that leads to worldly authority, it's because he knew that power is meant for connection, not domination. Jesus knows these things because he's been listening. Day after day, he dwells with God. He embodies the teachings he received from his faith community and on his mother Mary's lap and in his father Joseph's wood shop. Jesus shows us what it looks like to walk in wisdom and to make right choices even though there are so many voices from so many sources that call for our allegiance.

If we are to be like Jesus, and that's what being a disciple is all about, we also must begin by first listening to the voice of God that was built into us and is at our center. This voice tells us, above all and after it all, that we are God's beloved too. When we know this, we can filter out so much of the muck and sludge that slows us down and traps us. We can release ourselves into the arms of God's love. We can make space for the work of transformation to occur in us.

As we begin our Lenten journey this year, consider what voices might be pulling you toward the poor choices that entrap you. Carve out time for silence ... open yourselves up and make space so that the still, small voice of God may come into fuller focus. Listen for God, who is always there, right at the center of your heart, inviting you into a life of wisdom and belovedness in this world outside of Eden.