

“Wise Like God?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7
Matthew 4: 1-11

There have been countless jokes and humorous stories told over Adam and Eve and the serpent over the years. I remember listening to Bill Cosby’s routine on this familiar story from the Bible. He makes fun of Adam being a one-dimensional man, and Eve teasing her husband, and then, once they take a bite of the apple, God tells them to all “get out of the pool.”

Debbie and I had a brilliant Hebrew professor at Princeton Seminary named Leong Seow. Dr. Seow emigrated from Southeast Asia and knows over 25 different languages and is fluent in at least 5. In class, when teaching about “the fall,” he would depict Adam as a small child, saying: “She gave it to me! She gave it to me! She gave it to me!” And then, sheepishly, he would say: “And I ate it.”

We all have our preconceptions about this familiar story in the Bible. Oftentimes, we will use humor as a way to mask how this story makes us uncomfortable, and in doing so, we might add to the preconceptions, rather than seeing clearly what is happening in this story from Genesis. For instance, we often have heard that Eve gave Adam an apple to eat – but there’s absolutely no mention of an apple in the Hebrew text. Instead, it’s “the fruit of the tree” which Eve gives to Adam. And very often a direct correlation is made between the serpent and the devil, with this being the first instance of the devil’s temptation to humanity. Yet, we read that “the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (3:1). If we wish to make that earlier correlation, then that would mean God created the devil and evil. Is that where we want to be in our interpretation of this passage?

Sometimes, what’s helpful with a very familiar passage of scripture is to leave behind our preconceptions, and look at it with fresh eyes, asking questions such as: What is happening in this story? Who are the participants in the story? Where are the nuances within the narrative? How does God speak to us in those nuances? And finally, where does the rubber meet the road of faith for us as 21st-century Christians?

As we talked about this passage on Tuesday night at the Lenten Bible Study, this passage can be divided into two sections: “God Says”, and “Humanity Doesn’t Listen.” In the first section, God speaks to the vocation of humanity, as well as the limits of humanity’s freedom. In 2:15, we read that, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” That is humanity’s vocation – to tend and keep this creation which God has entrusted to our care. There is plenty for humanity to have for

sustenance within that garden, so there is only one limitation God places on that freedom: “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” (2:16-17). God does not offer an explanation why not to eat of that tree, but there is an expectation that man does not need to ask why – only trust God and obey.

The portion of chapter two which we didn’t read this morning is where God decides that man should not be alone, and “forms every animal of the field and every bird of the air” (2:19). And God also forms the woman from the rib of the man, and they are to be partners together in the work of tending the garden. What’s noteworthy at the end of chapter two is that “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (2:25). Humanity did not know what it meant to be guilty or ashamed or sinful, because humanity did not seek to see the world through any other lens than their own.

That changes in the second section of our passage. The serpent is described as “more crafty” than any other wild animal. Ironically, the Hebrew word for “crafty” is similar to the word for “naked” used in the previous verse. As the serpent craftily engages the woman in conversation, humanity is left exposed or naked to such temptation.

How is the serpent crafty? In the way the question is phrased to the woman. “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” As someone said Tuesday, it puts Eve on the defensive right away. “Well, no, we can eat of fruit of the trees in the garden. It’s just that one in the middle of the garden, we can’t even touch it, or we’ll die.” Now, that’s not exactly what God said in 2:16-17, is it? It’s a bit of an exaggeration. Linda Bourne said that reminded her of the “telephone game” we play as children – when someone tells their neighbor one thing, and by the time it reaches the end of the line of people, it’s turned into something completely different! And remember: God didn’t tell Eve this in chapter two – he told Adam. Just one more case of the man not getting the instructions right when communicating with his wife!

It’s this exaggeration that the serpent jumps on. “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” (3:5). Adam and Eve heard mortal death, and the serpent plays on that fear. “Oh, it’s nothing that bad – God wants you to be wise like he is.” The death God spoke of was a death to the way humanity was created: innocent, shameless, guiltless. Now, seeing the world through the eyes of God, humanity’s eyes are opened, and they know that they are naked and exposed, and they sought to cover themselves. Everything has changed, and there is no going back.

Ultimately, this story continues to speak to the basic human desire to be like God, to seek wisdom like God, to yearn for immortality like God, and, in seeking all of that, to test and often disobey God. We can focus attention on the serpent and a preconceived parallel to the devil all we want. But that will never change the core theme of the story, which is that humanity chose, and continues to make choices, which run counter to God’s love for us as God’s

children. Because, deep down, we yearn to know everything as God knows, and the serpent's invitation is much more enticing than the command to trust God to know what God's talking about.

Which is why we are grateful that God did not literally mean we would die if we ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Which is why we are grateful that God chose to remain in relationship with us, even when we broke covenant with our Creator. Which is why we are grateful that God decided, in his abundant wisdom and mercy, to not leave us alone, but to send himself in human form, that we might know the fullness of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, and throughout those forty days he remained obedient and faithful. When the devil tested him to relieve his hunger, Jesus trusted God would provide for his needs, as God had provided for Adam and Eve in the garden. When the devil tested him to save himself from mortal danger, Jesus trusted God would provide for his needs, as God provides for all humanity's needs. When the devil tested him with all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus trusted God to be his only Lord, and showed that allegiance throughout his earthly ministry. Jesus is our Lord, our friend, and our example in times of making faithful choices. He is our guide and our strength as we face the challenges which life brings.

(Picking up the bowl of ashes) On Wednesday, we took these ashes and marked the beginning of Lent. These ashes have many meanings, but one which spoke to me today is how we are formed of the earth, and it is to earth that we shall return. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." God created Adam and Eve from the dust, and we are their ancestors, keepers of the garden, fallen men and women, who struggle in our faithfulness to God.

We are not immortal, even though we are tempted to think we will live forever. We are not perfect, even though we are tempted to believe we can be. We are not sinless, even though we are tempted to judge others rather than judging ourselves. We are human; we are mortal; we are imperfect; we are sinful.

And we are God's. We are loved unconditionally - with all our imperfections, all our sin, all our mortality. For as sisters and brothers of Christ, we are lifted from our sinful state to be new creatures, redeemed through Christ's life and death and resurrection.

We are dust and to dust we shall return. And in the interim time, may we live humbly, faithfully, and in gratitude for the life God has blessed us to live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.