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Dependence: The Root of it All

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

(Lent 1)

The scripture that Katherine just read from Matthew's gospel provides one account of temptation. In it, we see what perfect obedience looks like. Our second reading for today is a story about temptation, too, but with a different response and outcome. It is the story of Adam, Eve, and serpent in the Garden of Eden.

When we hear something as familiar as the story I am getting ready to read we cannot help but to bring our assumptions with us. What others have said about this story shapes the ways we hear it and understand it. So I want to ask you to do something that might be impossible. I want you to try to suspend what it is you think you know about this scripture.

I want you to try to set aside John Milton's Paradise Lost.

I want you set aside Dante's Inferno.

And Michelangelo's magnificent fresco.

And any assumptions you have or have heard about "who is to blame" for eating the forbidden fruit.

I even want you to set aside how this story has been used to explain what we call the "total depravity" of humankind.

What I want ask you to do is listen to what is described and what is said in this story.

What does God assume about the purpose of human beings?

What is it about what the serpent says that causes Eve (and Adam – who, you will notice is standing right beside Eve the whole time) to eat the fruit?

What changes from the first sentence I will read to the last?

And before we listen, we will pray – for the Holy Spirit to open us to hear God's Word. Please join me...

By your Spirit, O Lord, speak to us a word of grace.

Startle us.

Confront us.

*Comfort us.
That by dwelling in your word, we might be changed.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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The Lord God took the man and put him the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree in 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 the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree of 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.

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Some people look out their office window and see a magnificent cityscape. Others see a beautiful courtyard, or maybe a nature view. My office window looks out onto a cemetery. Cold, hard, stones – with birth dates and death dates.

If ever I get to feeling too big for my britches – all I have to do is look my left for a dose of humility. I joke with people that it is a good thing to have a daily reminder of the inevitable.

Joking aside, there are days that I am tempted to forget. There are days when I get so preoccupied and busy and wrapped up in my own agenda, or self-importance, or stress that I lose sight of the fact that my life has limits. That my to-do list will never be completed. That my plans will never be fully implemented. And on the positive side, that the things that threaten to overwhelm me are, in the end, relative.

I have come to appreciate the fact that I can't help but to look over a cemetery every day. It reminds me of the freedom that comes from not being, ultimately, in charge.

I wonder how many times Adam and Eve walked past that tree that God planted in the center of the garden. The one of which they were forbidden to eat? That tree that served as a reminder that they were, ultimately, not in charge.

I wonder if they ever asked the question that has always been in my mind about why in the world God would plant a tree that would be off limits? Was it some kind of divine joke? A divine set-up? A testing ground for human will?

If Adam and Eve had been troubled by these kinds of questions – or even by the presence of the tree – our scripture doesn't seem too interested in telling us. Until the time the serpent slithers onto the scene we find Adam and Eve strolling in the garden naked and unafraid seemingly comfortable and at peace with the world that God created and the boundaries that God had given them.

When the serpent appears it does something interesting. It talks. Sometimes that trips people up. Do we really believe that the first man and the first woman stood in a garden that we can't locate and talked with a snake that initiated a conversation? Once, while he was teaching a class, a student raised his hand to ask the great theologian Karl Barth if he believed the serpent actually spoke in the Garden of Eden. Barth's response was, "In the end whether the serpent spoke or not is not important; what is important is what he said."¹

What the serpent said reframed the world that Adam and Eve thought they knew. Until the serpent spoke, the tree at the center of the garden served as a gracious reminder that the garden (and everything in it) was God's. That tree was a daily reminder for Adam and Eve to trust in God's provision...that everything they needed, God had provided. After the serpent spoke, the tree that started as a boundary to be respected became a commodity to be desired.

If you eat of the fruit of the tree at the center of the garden you will not die. For God knows that your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

So when the woman saw that the tree 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...

What the serpent said introduced something that had not previously existed in Garden of Eden – anxiety. An anxiety that there was something more that Adam and Eve needed; an anxiety that the limits of their freedom were something to fear.

¹ <http://www.jesusradicals.com/wp-content/uploads/karl-barth-and-us.pdf>

If we are to read this story as an explanation for human sinfulness, as “the fall,” as an illustration of the how we got to the place we now are, I think we would do well to look carefully at the role that anxiety plays in Adam and Eve’s decisions and consider how it impacts our own.

It was Reinhold Niebuhr – another great theologian – who said that as human beings, we live our lives in a paradox of freedom on the one hand and limits on the other. When we bump into our limits it makes us anxious. And our anxiety becomes the occasion for our sin.²

What are the limits that make you anxious?

Is it time? Time that beats on and reminds us that one day we will run out of it?

Is it age? Recognizing that there are things you want to do that you no longer can do?

Is it legacy? Wishing you could be remembered as someone who made something of yourself?

In our anxiety – we overreach.

For more money. Or power. Or control.

In our anxiety – we learn to cope.

By overusing alcohol or by withdrawing from the ones closest to us.

In our anxiety – we pretend.

That everything is “just fine” and that we can manage the burdens of our life on our own.

Sometimes the ways we deal with our anxiety has little impact on anyone outside of ourselves.

Other times it is more tragic – it breaks up a marriage. Maybe even a family.

Still more, it impacts groups of people, nations, history.

There is a simmering war in the Ukraine that is predicated on the anxiety of a country that feels like it is losing its influence.

In my own life, I know that the insidious part of anxiety is that it leads me to make the same poor choices again and again because I am hungry for something that I can’t satisfy by my own efforts.

It’s a downward spiral. When we get caught chasing after things to alleviate our anxiety we don’t tend to stop.

² Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume 1* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1964) pp. 178-186. Niebuhr builds upon the thought of Kierkegaard and Augustine.

And if you are someone who is in recovery from an addiction, or who, like me, has a friend or family member who is, then you know how far people will go until they recognize that they are utterly and completely dependent on the grace of God.

If you are someone, like me, whose definition of “enough” has changed over time as you make more and more money, then you know how difficult it is to trust that God will “give us our daily bread.”

If you are someone who, like me on occasion, views the world through the eyes of cynicism because you can’t allow yourself to hope for anything better, then maybe you know how difficult it is to believe that “God so loved the world that he gave his own Son...”

There is no antidote to our anxiety if we believe that we are the answers to the questions we seek.

The grace that alleviates our anxiety is that in Jesus Christ God loves us beyond even the places we have overreached – and that in Christ’s death and resurrection we are – once again – reconciled with the God who created us and gives us freedom and limits.

Over the next few weeks, as we journey through Lent and toward Easter, we will be focusing on the reality of our complete and total dependence on the grace of God.

It is my hope that at the end of this journey, we might receive the news of resurrection a renewed appreciation and wonder that will lead us to live differently...as those who trust in and shape our lives by God’s promises.

Amen.