

“It’s Tempting”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on March 5, 2017

It’s tempting to read the Bible simplistically, to assume its meaning is crystal clear and no discernment is necessary. This is, after all, the easiest way to approach the Scriptures, but as we see in the Gospel reading today, the devil can use this method to his advantage. Standing on the top of the temple, the devil quotes the Bible *at Jesus* of all people—imagine that—and uses Scripture to encourage Jesus to jump. Now if the devil will try to fool *Jesus* using Scripture, none of us are immune to being manipulated by people quoting the Bible. I imagine you know what I mean.

Of course once you realize that people and institutions have used the Bible to cajole and control you rather than liberate and enlighten you, the next temptation is to walk away from the Scriptures altogether. It’s tempting to decide, “Eh, it’s just some ancient text written by people who weren’t as evolved as we are. Sacred, smacred. Inspired? Maybe a few bits and pieces, but we’d rather find our inspiration elsewhere—in the woods, in the sky, in the poets.”

Jesus, however, neither takes the devil’s word for it nor abandons the texts altogether. Rather he uses the sacred texts and infuses them with life and energy to meet the present challenge, which is more of a spiritual task than an intellectual one. He’s not so much debating the devil as he is working out how to live what he believes. Jesus does not merely regurgitate Scriptures’ words. He interprets them. Jesus is not easily persuaded by a misapplication of the text, no matter how convincing some devil can make the argument sound.

When I was growing up, I was given a certain story about Adam and Eve, and it went like this: Eve sinned by subverting the authority of her husband, eating the forbidden fruit, and giving it to Adam. Presumably if she had asked permission instead, clearer heads would have prevailed and the world would not have crumbled. Only a woman—irrational and emotional as we are—could be tricked by a silly snake. In one of the Bible’s very first stories we have quintessential proof of why men should be the decision-makers.

I have since read Genesis for myself many times, and it turns out that particular storyline is nowhere to be found. God gives no wife-specific instructions to Eve and no husband-specific instructions to Adam. God’s instructions are to eat freely all the fruits of the garden, save one. As best I can tell, their job is to enjoy life, enjoy the garden, enjoy one another, and enjoy God, as if God’s purpose in creating was relationship, beauty, and joy. Everything is good. There are literally no other rules, except this one about the forbidden tree.

This one rule leaves us with a lot to ponder. It’s not exactly obvious why eating from the so-called “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” is off limits. The whole thing is rather vague and mysterious, which perhaps is why people of faith have tried so hard to nail it down through the years. Assuming that the symbol of fruit has some form of real life meaning for us today,

“forbidden fruit” has come to mean anything from pride to sex, from greed and gluttony to the failure to submit to your husband to the failure to lead your wife.

The lack of a clear meaning could make it tempting to walk away from this story—leave it in Sunday School where you found it and search for a more sophisticated story instead. But before you do . . . remember that for centuries this was the story that passed from generation to generation, long before it was written in stone. Can you imagine all the variations that must have been floating around—what, with grandpa’s tendency to exaggerate, and this family member’s habit of forgetting the details, and each person’s proclivity for emphasizing different parts of the story as most important? When we think of the oral tradition that preceded the written one, we might be tempted to say, “Gosh, that’s about as reliable as a game of telephone. For all we know, the original wisdom has been thoroughly garbled by the years of retelling.”

Or we could say, “Wow, there must be something really special, powerful, and important about this story for it to have survived through millennia, through countless generations of good storytellers and not-so-good storytellers, to have survived the dictation of scribe after scribe, to have survived the later scrutiny of the church.”

This is a story people have been telling for centuries to try and make sense of the complicated human condition, to make sense of where our frightening capacity to choose evil comes from, and why we often feel this acute separation from the God who created us and loves us. I don’t know about you, but to me those feel like important questions. These are matters I want to understand, and I don’t want to be so arrogant as to think I can figure it out on my own without some help from the ancients.

The ancient wisdom tells us it all began at the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. If we were to assume knowledge itself is the forbidden fruit then this entire conversation and quest for answers becomes rather ridiculous. We’d be sinning just by retelling the story and asking questions. Because for what other reason do we pass along stories but to deepen our understanding of life, God, the earth and its people? But if knowledge isn’t the problem, what is? What is at the root of temptation? What might this fruit from the Tree of Knowledge represent? What on earth prompts God’s good humans to do harm?

If I were to give you a straight and simple answer to that question, you ought to be suspicious, since you know that’s a tactic of the devil, to spit out religious-sounding words that don’t account for the complexity of things. Spoiler alert: I’m not going to give you a straight answer. But I will imagine with you about some possibilities, and I trust you will bring your own mind into this task of interpretation. I trust you every time I stand behind this pulpit—I trust that this is a communal work we are doing, even if I am doing all the talking. I trust that your heart and your spirit are engaged and alert, that you are too smart, and more importantly, too awake to let me spoon-feed you anything. I bring my whole soul to the work of interpretation, and so do you, and together we seek not just understanding, but the very presence of the Holy One. We seek not only truth, but also transformation.

There is a reason our sacred stories were passed down orally long before they were written down. In order to transfer a story orally from generation to generation, you have to really know

the story. There is no passive receptivity. You must enter the story, and the story must enter you. You have ownership of the story, and the story has ownership of you. The story begins to shape you, but you also shape the story every time you tell it. Story-telling is dangerous work—the story might change you, after all. Or, you might resist change and alter the story instead, and what if—God forbid—the meaning is lost due to your own self-serving edits?

Could it be that the power of story is more resilient than any one storyteller? What if you're not so much a threat to its purity but a cracked and necessary medium of its expression? What if the story can't live without vessels who own it as theirs to tell, to remember, and to interpret?

Come now. I want to tell a story. I am asking, "Come with me while I take you somewhere." The story is my gift to you, which means once it leaves my mouth it is yours, and you get to do with it what you choose, retell it in your own words perhaps. I tell our story this way:

Once upon a time the world was good. Everyone agreed from the tadpoles to the angels in heaven. It was *all* good. Even God said so. There wasn't so much as a whisper of violence anywhere—even the lions and tigers and bears were peaceful. Oh my! Can you imagine? There was no bloodshed, no war, no backstabbing, no jealousy, no tyranny. All was well.

Life was to be enjoyed, and there was nothing much to worry about, and there weren't a lot of rules or restrictions. There was just living and breathing, and loving and learning. There was so much to explore—a whole huge garden's worth of adventure and discovery. Adam and Eve were intoxicated with observation. "What's that flower? Look at how the clouds change shapes! What do we call that little critter? What's that sound? Oh my gosh, look what happens if we bury this seed in the dirt and wait! Everywhere we look, do we not find another miracle? Are we not slowly uncovering who we are, how it feels to be alive, and what it is like to love, to know and be known, to see and taste and touch and hear?"

But within this huge garden of adventure, there lived one temptation, and temptation knows it must come in disguise or no one will listen. So temptation chose the cute little creature that could dance its way through the grass like nothing else could and wind its way up a tree like a piece of music, gliding to an inner rhythm no one else could hear. It was a beautiful and alluring creature, full of wisdom and passion, and Adam and Eve had rightly learned to admire its unique form.

But on this particular day the animal itself went into hiding and a sinister voice overtook its body. Adam and Eve were still living in bliss and knew nothing of predators, dangers, or false prophets. They assumed everything could be trusted, and why wouldn't they? The good world had been very good to them.

Then temptation whispered in their ears, "It could be better, you know. This slow, meandering life of discovery is for the birds! The path of learning isn't fit for humans. Bite into this fruit and you will instantly be like God, knowing all, knowing good and evil."

The voice was right about one thing—their knowledge of good would be abruptly joined by the knowledge of evil, namely their own. Aside from that, the serpent's promise was just an illusion. There was no way for a human being to attain the status of a god—not because God was selfish

and hoarded the power for God's self as the serpent would suggest, but because God was good and knew power should be shared. God appointed humanity as participants in creation, not masters over it, admirers of creation, not destroyers, students of creation, not dictators.

The tempter told Adam, and the tempter told Eve that this partnership was not enough, and the tempter was very convincing. He said the world was not essentially good, and they must conquer it and subdue it and bend it to their will.

What the tempter did not bother to explain was that once you no longer believe the creation is essentially good, you will appoint yourself judge and lord over it. For the earth's own sake, you will work to control, manage, discipline, and restrict it. You will name many things evil, regardless of whether God has called them good. Life will become a competition and a toil, an endless struggle and a bloody fight, and this will be all the proof you need that things are definitely out of control and you alone must fix them.

Over time you might even convince yourself God is just like you—anal retentive, OCD, anxiety-ridden, and desperate to keep everything under control. You will make God in your own image, and then you will become disgusted at how harsh and exacting and judgmental God is and want nothing more to do with him.

You will actually believe it was God who kicked you out of the generous garden. You will forget that in the garden, you were loved and God only ever called you good. You won't remember that you left by your own choice when something convinced you all that goodness wasn't enough and what you really wanted was control, power, and instantaneous knowledge without experience or training. The tempter said you could attain it all with a single bite.

Together Adam and Eve sunk their teeth into it, and the world around them grew hostile and adversarial, and horrible violence broke out among their own family as generation after generation ate the fruit and ingested the poison. But do not lose heart, dear listeners. Jesus has shown us how not to take the bait, though it wasn't easy. When you're wandering through a wilderness, it's even easier than it was in the garden to mistake a devil for the voice of reason.

But here's the Gospel truth: You can leave the garden, but the garden won't leave you. God still calls to you by name, and your name is good. The garden of adventure is in your DNA—you cannot get rid of it. In your memory there lives a map that knows the way out of shame and back to God. Jesus came to show you this, in case you've gotten lost. There is always, always, always a way back to God, a way back to good, and you don't have to know it all to get there. You just have to give up enough control for the grace to squeeze through. You just have to loosen your grip on shortcuts and deceptions and open your arms and your heart to the way of Jesus.

It's tempting to think the way back to God must be impossible. But, what if it isn't? What if the Tree of Life is close enough to touch, to taste, to eat? What if God is right here and you don't have to go searching? What if, even in the darkest, loneliest hour, there are angels waiting to attend to you?

Beloved of God, may we taste and see that the Lord is good, is good indeed. The End and Amen.