

Robin McGonigle
University Congregational Church
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“The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”

Genesis 3:1-13

When people find out that I am a minister, they often want to ask a question which has been on their minds. Some of those questions are fairly basic (from my vantage point), and others are fairly complex.

“What does God look like?”

“Where do you find that verse in the Bible?”

“Why is there suffering and pain?”

But the question I find hardest to answer – and in fact, have no answer for – is this one: “Why did God create things like broccoli and brussell sprouts?” It is truly a theological stumper. Most of us agree that God created the world and pronounced it “good”. But what about things that are *not* good? Like black licorice and tarantulas and tornados? Or red ants, dandelions and hurricanes? Our scripture text for today speaks to this question.

The serpent was clever, more clever than any wild animal God had made. He spoke to the Woman: “Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?”

The Woman said to the serpent, “Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the garden. It’s only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘don’t eat from it; don’t even touch it or you’ll die.’”

The serpent told the Woman, “You won’t die. God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you’ll see what’s really going on. You’ll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil.”

When the Woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it—she'd know everything!—she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to her husband, and he ate.

Immediately the two of them did “see what’s really going on”—saw themselves naked! They sewed fig leaves together as makeshift clothes for themselves. When they heard the sound of GOD strolling in the garden in the evening breeze, the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from GOD. GOD called to the Man: “Where are you?”

He said, “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid.”

GOD said, “Who told you you were naked? Did you eat from that tree I told you not to eat from?”

The Man said, “The Woman you gave me as a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree, and, yes, I ate it.”

GOD said to the Woman, “What is this that you’ve done?”

“The serpent seduced me,” she said, “and I ate.”

Genesis 3:1-13

For the next several weeks, we are going to examine the meaning of several Biblical texts with a tree in the story.

- An oak tree where Abraham got a glimpse of God’s grand plan, impossible though it seemed at the time,
- A bush aflame in the wilderness, burning furiously before Moses, but not consumed,
- And Jonah, whose story not only includes a fish... but also a plant,
- Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus,
- And we will talk about the tree that became a cross.

Look with me now through the branches of our first tree – the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is a story of how sin began to plague this world. If you listen to the story, you quickly realize that this is not a historically true story. It reads

like a fable; and it is. The story is a story told for the purpose of explaining something what humans find difficult to understand – how an omnipotent God who creates with blessing ends up with a flawed creation and sinful humanity.

Ok, I can't resist... I found millions of "Adam and Eve" jokes and I just have to share a couple this morning. One day, Eve asked that age-old question women ask men, "Adam, do you love me?" And Adam, with a shake of his head replied, "There is no one else I could love more!"

Did you know that Eve was the first woman to say, "I don't have a thing to wear!" and literally be telling the truth?

Back to the story. The text tells us that the man and the woman were naked but not ashamed. The Hebrew word used for naked is *'arummim*. Then it says that the snake was more clever than any creature God had made. The Hebrew word for clever is *'arum*. The writer creates a pun about nakedness and cleverness. A similar play on words in English might be "nude" and "shrewd". The moral of this tale could be **"when we think we are being shrewd, we'll end up feeling nude."** And it is the truth! How many times have we engaged in something we knew was not quite right and did it anyway, only to feel naked and alone afterward?

In this fable, the dialog is particularly important. As we listen to what the characters say to one another, we learn more specifically what the characters want and what the story might be saying about humanity and sin. The serpent challenges the woman, "Did God really say that you could not eat from any tree in this garden?" And the woman responds, "From the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said we must not eat from it, nor touch it lest we die." Neither the serpent nor the woman has accurately reported what God actually said. Look back a chapter. God actually said, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." The woman reinterprets God's direction and says that the special tree cannot even be touched, much less have its fruit eaten.

This is one of the first lessons we can learn from the fable... God's words are usually words of generosity and grace. Like Eve, however, we are tempted to reinterpret God's words of "shall" into words of "shall not." For example, God says, "eat of all these beautiful and luscious trees. Pears, apples, peaches, lemons, grapefruit, mango, avocados, bananas, papayas, oranges, dates, coconuts... they're all yours!" And somehow we hear, "Don't even think about touching that fig tree!" **Our God is a God of blessing and generosity! But humanity puts limits and negative attributes onto God.**

After both the man and woman had eaten, the consequences are presented. First, "their eyes are opened". Could it be that they are now in fact like God? Second, they do gain knowledge "they knew they were naked" (*arummim*). This simple fact – the source of no shame before – now leads to a whirlwind of activity all designed to solve what is now a problem. Nakedness must now be covered; and shame directs all of their actions. Thirdly, "they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons."

Have you ever felt a fig leaf? At certain points in their cycles of growth, they feel like medium grade sandpaper. Wearing a fig leaf while stark naked is a long way from the comfort of our modern cotton underwear. I can imagine whenever this fable was told in homes and around campfires, this scene brought forth great peals of laughter and embarrassed looks between the listeners.

So the newly clad pair hear the sound of God walking in the garden for the breezes of the day, and they rush off to hide, no doubt scratching themselves all the way. Upon reaching the spot where conversation is anticipated, God calls out, "Where are you?" Adam's reply is lengthy: "I heard the sound of you in the garden. I was afraid, because I was naked. I hid myself." It's like a child in trouble. He could have simply said, "I'm here."

Adam's reply seems calculated to reveal facts, but to conceal reasons. It does not satisfy God's curiosity. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree I told you not to eat?" God's question is a "yes" or "no" answer

kind of question, but the man starts spilling his guts. “The woman, whom you gave me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate.” It is a blatant passing of the buck. “The woman did it,” says the man and then not knowing when to leave well enough alone, rushes on to blame God, “after all, you, God, gave her to me!” The woman also passes the buck and blames the snake.

Isn't this the way we tend to do things? Harmony is broken; relationships shattered. Instead of each taking responsibility for his/her part, each blames the other. And because we cannot accept the brokenness, the separation becomes a chasm and the chasm becomes a curse.

My college roommate and I were best friends. We lived together more than 3 years. The day after we graduated, I was her maid of honor. She was scheduled to be my maid of honor 2 months later. But I never received any communication from her after her wedding. Ever. My wedding came and went without my best friend. I didn't know what happened.

Eventually, we reconnected and had periodic contact through the last twenty years. But I never knew what I had done to upset her so long ago. There was distance between us that was unresolved. 31 years went by. And a couple of months ago, she called and asked me to meet her for dinner. She apologized and told me what happened. It was a relief and a watershed moment. We communicate more now, and freely.

Look through the branches of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. See this fable of how humans destroy the best of what God has given to us. This story is as old as humanity itself. Humans are shrewd. We lie. We blame. We refuse to take responsibility. We take on things we are not equipped to handle. The result? We end up standing outside of God's perfect plan... feeling naked and alone.

Resource Used:

“Behold the Tree” written by Aiden W. Mead and Peter J. Mead. [Creative Communications for the Parish](#). 2001.