

February 10, 2008 - First Sunday in Lent (Purple)

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

Revised Standard Version of the Bible

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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."

¹Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" ²And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; ³but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. ⁵For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶So 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, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Psalm 32 (UMH 766)

Romans 5:12-19

¹²Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—¹³sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. ¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. ¹⁸Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. ¹⁹For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be

made righteous.

Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. ³And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Questions my Smart Aleck Kid Asked Me

The fence between Heaven and Hell was falling apart. It was badly in need of repair. Saint Peter consulted his records and saw that by the terms of an ancient agreement, it was Satan's turn to fix the fence. So he gritted his teeth and sought an audience with the Prince of Darkness.

He found him in the nether regions, cleaning his pitchfork. Peter did not sit down. The smell of brimstone was heavy in the hot air. "You need to fix the fence," he said.

The devil twitched his red tail. He scratched behind a horn. "Now, Pete," he said, "you could be a little more friendly, after all these years."

"I don't want to be here at all," Peter said. "I just came to tell you the fence needs fixing."

"My people are too busy to spend time on your lousy fence. Fix it yourself."

"See here, you devil; it's your turn to fix the fence. It's the right thing to do. And if you don't fix the fence, I'll sue."

The devil laughed his wickedest laugh. "Go ahead and sue! Where are you going to find a

lawyer?"

Back a few months ago when we were studying the book of Genesis in our Sunday morning Bible class, I came to a realization. We were reading the stories in the first few chapters of Genesis, including today's Old Testament scripture reading about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Now, over the years I have spent a fair amount of time on this passage in various Bible studies, and we usually end up going over the passage in detail - looking at each phrase and sentence - even individual words - looking for meaning and intent. We looked at the wording closely to try and figure out who was at fault, Adam or Eve. Who did the sinning, and who just went along. We looked at who was interacting with the serpent. We looked at the wording that indicates that God created mankind - men **and** women, not just man, in God's image. We studied the exact wording of what God says to Adam and Eve. We noted that the Bible never indicates what fruit it was that Adam and Eve ate.

That's all good and well. After all, likely more than a few Jewish and Christian theologians have based their doctoral dissertations on dissecting this passage word by word, comparing ancient manuscripts, translating it from Hebrew, consulting the expert commentaries, looking for meaning. And unless you read the passage in detail, you fall prey to misconceptions and folklore. What is being said in this passage is not necessarily what people think is being said.

The realization that I came to was that all that focus on the details - the minutia - the who did what to whom - was missing the point. Sort of like missing the forest for the trees.

Let me back up a little and explain - or confess - something. When I read the stories from the first few chapters of Genesis - the creation stories, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, the Tower of Babel - I don't take those as literal historical events. I don't think that the Garden of Eden actually existed as it says in this passage, that Adam and Eve were literally the first two humans on earth, and that a serpent talked them into eating a piece of fruit.

I have no way of proving that is the case, but that is how my mind makes sense of these stories. In my mind, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is more along the lines of one of Jesus' parables - it didn't necessarily happen the way the story says, but the story is full of truth nonetheless.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is one of the best known and most loved stories in the

Gospels. It touches millions of people, many of them not even Christians. It contains profound truths about humans and their relation to each other and to God. But in the end the story of the prodigal son is just a story that Jesus made up to make his point.

I guess that what I am trying to say is that even though I don't think that the story of Adam and Eve is the literal historical truth, I do think that it is the spiritual truth. The realization I came to was that to me these old stories of Genesis were handed down to us as a way of answering some of the big questions of our existence on earth and our relationship to God.

In my mind, I picture the ancient Israelites sitting around the fire at night, after finishing dinner. Sort of like the shepherds watching their flocks by night. The elders of the tribe are repeating the stories of the Israelites - their history, their battles, and the stories of the God of Abraham. We know from our study of Genesis that these stories were part of an oral tradition - they were handed down orally from generation to generation long before someone decided to write them down into the books that would become the Torah, and then eventually the Old Testament of the Bible.

As the elder is reciting a story of God in front of the campfire, in my mind's eye I picture a rebellious teenager sitting there listening. And what rebellious teenagers are prone to do, today as well as back then, is to ask questions to try and trip up their parents and other persons in authority, and to challenge the accepted view of the world. That is why I named this sermon "Questions my smart aleck teenager asked me."

Well, what question did the teenager ask the elder? I think it went something like this. *"If God made the earth and everything in it, and God is perfect, then why is the earth and everything in it not perfect?"* And then I can imagine the rebellious teenager gave some examples of how the world is imperfect to back up his question, like the guy in the next village who beats his wife and kids. Or his younger sister that everyone loved, but who got sick and died last year. Or maybe the Assyrian king that attacked Israel and killed a lot of people and took some others away to Assyria to be slaves. Then the teenager sits back with a smug grin on his face.

But the elder was prepared. After all, he had been a teenager once and had asked the same kinds of questions. And the elder was prepared because it is one of those questions that bugs Christians and non-Christians alike. *"If God made the earth and everything in it, and God is perfect, then why is the earth and everything in it not perfect?"*

So the elder began to tell the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He said:

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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." ¹Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" ²And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; ³but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. ⁵For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶So 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, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Now to me the key points here are these:

¹⁷but 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."

And:

⁵For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

And:

⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

It is easy to miss those three statements. They are sort of buried in the middle of the story about fruit and serpents and trees and all the rest of it. But they are the heart of the story to me - they are the spiritual truth that this story is meant to convey. God made us all in God's image and that means we know the difference between good and evil, just as God know the difference between good and evil. And we been given the choice by God - the free will - to either be good or evil.

So that is the answer to the smart aleck teenager's question. The world is imperfect because when God made the world it was created with both good and evil in it. And we humans have God's ability to see the good and the evil and to know the difference. After all, does a dog or a tree or an eagle know what is good and what is evil? When a cat catches a mouse does that cat know that his eating the mouse is evil to the mouse? No, I don't think so. All the cat knows is that it is hungry and the mouse looks good to eat. It doesn't know or care what the mouse thinks and feels.

But we do. Like God, we see the death and destruction of the world around us. And like God we feel sorrow at the evil around us. That is what Genesis means when it says that *Then the eyes of both were opened,*

So the next time you read one of these stories of Genesis, I would challenge you to look beyond the details of who did what to whom, and look for the question that the smart alecky teenager asked way back when. And look for the spiritual truth that is contained in the story.

Amen.