

Two Serpents
Genesis 3:1-7
March 17, 2019

We are well into the Lent season now. Lent is the season to do some serious self-reflection and be close to the Lord.

Joel 2:13 says, “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” God constantly calls humanity to return to him.

During this season, I would like to invite you to think about what happened in the Garden of Eden and what that means for us.

The stories of the creation and the original sin are familiar stories. In Genesis 2, we learn that we were created in the most delicate and refined fashion. God did not command us into being. Rather he formed us out of dust into his own image. It has a connotation that God used his own hands to fashion us into his own image. And then he filled our bodies with his own breath of life (2:7). The Hebrew word for “breath” is *ruah*. *Ruah* also means spirit. God filled us with his spirit so that a part of us would be forever divine. Yet he set a limit to what we can and cannot do. That limit is depicted as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17).

Isn't it interesting that he did not want us to eat the fruit that gives the knowledge of good and evil? Does this mean that God wanted us to be morally ignorant? What does the eating of the fruit that gives the knowledge of good and evil mean?

What the fruit stands for is that we cannot construct our own rights and wrongs. We cannot run our own lives and plan our own destiny. We cannot determine what is right and wrong based on own knowledge or life experiences or conscience.

Not eating the fruit that gives the knowledge of good and evil would represent that we acknowledge that we are dependent on God for the knowledge of good and evil and for our ultimate destiny. In other words, we are not the masters of our own fate. Eating the fruits, however, means that we, the humanity, willfully claimed the power to determine what is good and evil, instead of relying on God. The humanity is putting their own knowledge, conscience and life experiences above God's word and his

teachings to determine what is good and what is evil. In other words, it was their claim to be the gods of their own lives.

What God is teaching us in this story is that if we try to live our lives with our own moral standards without relying on him, we would surely die (Gen. 2:17).

The third chapter of Genesis describes the story of the fall of humanity. The passage we read this morning is a symbolic depiction of our attempt to run our own lives and to be our own deities.

The serpent said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said, “We may eat from any tree except from the one in the middle. God said, ‘You shall not even touch it. Otherwise you will surely die’.”

The serpent responded, “Oh, no. You are not going to die. God just doesn’t want you to be like him, as wise and smart as he is. God doesn’t want you to make your own decision about what is good and what is evil. But woman, why do you have to rely on him for that? Why can’t you make your own decision? You are smart. You are intelligent. I will tell you, you are not going to die.” The serpent led the woman to doubt that God was serious when he said, “You will surely die.”

The conversation between the serpent and the woman can be described as an internal struggle of all human beings. Temptation usually works that way, doesn’t it? It makes us doubt that God is serious about the consequences of sin?

God has given us many commandments: “Worship no one but God; keep the Sabbath and keep it holy; honor your parents; you shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not covet.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Take up your cross and follow me;” on and on and on. If you don’t keep God’s commandments, “you will surely die.”

As we face different life’s situations where we are directly confronted with God’s commandments we are tempted to think: “God is not serious about judging us and condemning us forever if we break some of his words. We won’t suffer any punishment or evil consequences just because we ignore one or two of his commandments.

“After all, if God were really serious about punishing us when those commandments are broken, we would have already received severe punishments. But we haven’t.

“God knows we are good people. He knows our struggle that when we are tempted. We are not rebellious against God. At least that is not our intention. God knows that. Plus, if God finds us really offensive and he punishes us, we can always repent and ask for forgiveness. A Loving God will surely forgive us and give us a second chance.”

Subtle thoughts, subtle temptations! The only difference between Eve and us is that Eve didn’t know how gracious and merciful God was and how forgiving God was, and we do. She didn’t have the benefit of history to know how slow God was to anger. But we do.

We have seen the history of Israel, the history of mankind, and our own personal history. We know God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love. So the temptation to doubt God’s seriousness could be even stronger for us than it was for Eve.

The woman looked at the fruit. It appeared to be good to eat. “Will it really give me divine wisdom and knowledge and make me like God? Oh, I will never rebel against God even if I have his knowledge and wisdom. In fact, I will always love God. If this fruit helps me to have his wisdom and knowledge, I can be a really good servant to him.”

Eve probably had such thoughts. In other words, eating the fruit looked like the right thing to do! It felt so right! “God knows my intention. God knows my struggle.”

That is the way it is with our sin, isn’t it? Sometimes it looks like the right thing to do! Even if it doesn’t, we try to convince ourselves that God knows our intention and our struggle. The only problem is that it goes against God’s commandment like Eve’s action violated God’s specific Word.

So, we fall into sin, trying to do the “right thing” by following our own desires, conscience, and wisdom. We even become a willing sinner trying to convince ourselves that God made us vulnerable or God made us a certain way. Even if God did not make us a certain way, God would understand our struggle and he would not punish us.

So, the serpent's subtle temptation, the snake's crafty distortion, continues.

There is an interesting passage in the Bible. In the Gospel of John chapter 3, we read about a conversation between Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus. In that conversation Jesus identifies himself as the serpent that saves lives.

In John 3:14 Jesus said, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, the Son of Man must be lifted up; that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus compares himself to a serpent. There are many images that Jesus uses to describe himself such as: I am the good shepherd; I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world, and so on and so forth. But a snake, a poisonous snake? That is a challenging metaphor, isn't it?

The reference Jesus is making is to a time when the Israelites were in the wilderness, and complained to Moses and God about their miserable condition. They complained that there was no food and water. They had mana but they were tired of it. They said, "We detest this miserable food."

It angered God. So, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people and the serpents bit them. Whoever was bitten died. Many people died. Eventually, the people came to Moses and confessed their sins of complaining against him and the Lord, and begged Moses to pray for their deliverance.

When Moses prayed, the Lord said to Moses: "Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." Moses made a serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole; and whoever was bitten by a snake and looked at the serpent on the pole lived.¹

This story is what Jesus is referring to when he said, "Like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, the Son of Man must be lifted up; that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

¹ Numbers 21:8-9.

In his book, The Word Among Us, one of the finest Anglican preachers of our time Herbert O'Driscoll, commented on these two serpents: the serpent in the Garden and the serpent on the cross. This is what he said:

It depicts utter opposites — the serpent in the garden at the beginning of creation, and the serpent on the cross in an act of new creation. One seeks to manipulate and corrupt our human nature; the other, to free us and save our human nature. One appeals to our selfish desires; the other, to the very highest in us. One seduces, the other loves. One brings about our banishment from the presence of God; the other draws us into the presence of God. There is a host of rich meanings in this image of the two serpents — Satan, the serpent of temptation; Jesus, the serpent of salvation.²

O'Driscoll gives us an insight about the difference in the serpents. One is so crafty, so deceptive, so about himself. While the other is on the cross with outstretched arms that he might embrace the entire creation.

Jesus is lifted up and takes the sin of the world upon himself. Jesus takes the poison of our sinful existence upon himself so that the poison of rebellion against God may be taken out of us. The sin which has poisoned our relationship with the heavenly Father is removed from us each time we turn to the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first serpent, who twisted human nature to go against God in the first place, continues to seek to distort our character to conform to the corrupted nature of our society.

The second serpent, our Lord Jesus Christ, gives us healing and the wholeness. In his being lifted up and our acceptance of him, we now have a way to return to the Lord. The Lent season is the time not only to reflect on God's mercy and grace but also to accept them, claim them, and return to the Lord.

As we continue to examine ourselves during this Lent season, I invite you to respond to God's constant call to return to him. The way to return to him is to acknowledge God's word as the authority to guide us what is good and what is evil, and to obey his word.

² Herbert O'Driscoll, The Word Among Us, Year B, Vol. 2 (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2000), p. 31.