

“The One Man’s Obedience”

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 • Psalm 32 • Romans 5:12-19 • Matthew 4:1-11

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First Sunday in Lent

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is “a time for growth in faith — through prayer, spiritual discipline, and self-examination in preparation for the commemoration of the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is a time “for the whole community of faith to reflect deeply on the theme of baptismal discipleship.” It is “a period of forty days — like the flood of Genesis, Moses’ sojourn at Sinai, Elijah’s journey to Mount Horeb, Jonah’s call of repentance to Nineveh, and Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness. The Sundays in Lent are not counted among the forty days, as every Lord’s Day is a celebration of Christ’s resurrection. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and concludes at sunset on Holy Saturday, at the start of the Great Vigil of Easter.” (2018 *Book of Common Worship*)

Every year on the first Sunday in Lent, Christians in many churches around the globe hear the story of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. This year that story comes from Matthew’s gospel.

But this year, we also hear the story of another temptation, the temptation of the man and the woman in the garden of Eden. This is one of the earliest, and most foundational, stories in the Bible. The apostle Paul offers some brilliant commentary about this story in his epistle to the church in Rome, commentary which has decisively shaped Christianity’s understanding of who Jesus is and why he matters. We heard that passage today as well. I’m going to try to unpack these two very important passages. Let me advise you before we begin that we are talking about events here on an *epic* scale. Please don’t try to place this story in the realm of history. The message this story conveys goes far beyond history. It’s more about our *identity*: who we are — beloved children of God in a fallen world.

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” “Eden” is a Hebrew word that literally means “delight” or “pleasure.” “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Delight.” God’s design was that we should live in a place of pleasure. That is not, of course, what this world is today; there is far too much pain and suffering, sickness and sorrow, disease and death. God’s original design for humanity was endless joy. No tears and no fears.

“The LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of 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.’” God’s lavish bounty created an endless array of fruit trees, ours to enjoy. In the garden there were also two special trees. One was called the “tree of life.” This one we could partake of, as much as we wanted. The fruit of this tree granted us the ability to live forever. Immortality was a gift God was more than willing to share with us. The other tree was called the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The tree was off limits; it was the *only* tree in this bountiful garden that was forbidden to us.

We could have stayed in this Garden of Delight forever. Humanity could have been spared

sickness and disease, war and famine, tragedy and disaster. An idyllic existence – this was what God wanted for us. This was what God had in mind. Unfortunately, someone else had other plans.

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made.” By this point God has created a vast array of creatures – every bird of the air, every animal of the field. The serpent was different. In Hebrew it is called “*nahash*” – you can hear its hiss. The adjective that is used to describe it is “crafty,” or “shrewd,” or “cunning.” It was more “crafty” or “shrewd” or “cunning” than any other creature God had made. Scripture is clear; this serpent *is one of God’s creations*. Every creature that exists was created by God, including this one. Other biblical passages suggest that this creature was an angel of God that had gone awry. John Milton depicted this angel as a majestic being who had rebelled against God and had been banished from heaven. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s interpretation, this was the angel that sang discordant notes, while all the other angels sang in harmony.

This creature, this *nahash*, now set about to wreak havoc on earth. “He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in 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.’” Is that true? Is what the serpent says to the woman actually *true*? To some extent, *yes*. When all is said and done, God perceives that “the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” The biggest temptations in life often come dressed up in ways that *appear* to be true. “Eat this” – “do this” – “be that” – how many ways does our culture try to tempt us in ways that *look* or *sound* appealing? What the serpent says *is true*, after a fashion. Eating of that tree will *not* result in their loss of immortality. That’s the *other* tree. If they eat of this tree, they will not *immediately* die. But what the serpent doesn’t tell them is that there will be *consequences* for the choices they make. God will hold them accountable. God will remove their access to the tree of life.

“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.” Both of them fall prey to the serpent’s wiles. If one of them deserves more blame for that, it’s the man; God had given the commandment to *him*.

The story goes on from there. The man and the woman start feeling lust and fear. Paradise isn’t so safe, or so wholesome, anymore. They cover themselves. They hide from God. The man tries to hide the truth from God, and blames the woman for the choice he made. God punishes all three of them. The woman experiences pain and subjugation. The man has to work for food. God kicks them out of the Garden of Delight. The man and the woman can no longer eat from the tree of life. Their access to immortality has been eliminated. Paradise is lost. God’s beautiful creation is shattered.

And it remains shattered to this day. This is *not the world* as God intended it to be.

“Sin came into the world through one man,” wrote the apostle Paul, “and death came through sin.” Elsewhere Paul says some things about the woman, but in this passage his attention is fixed squarely on the man. “And so death spread to all because all have sinned.” The man’s sin resulted in death for all. That sin tainted *all* of humanity. *We all* make bad choices. Every single one of us who has ever done *anything* contrary to God’s will is a sinner. We are *all* like Adam. Disobedient, to a fault. Paul sees this as simply a statement of *fact*. Every now and then I hear people claiming they’ve never done anything wrong; they’re not guilty of any sins. *Yeah, right!* They need to have a mirror held up in front of them. Every single one of us is guilty of *something*. Or, rather, *many* somethings.

Paul calls Adam “a pattern of the one who was to come.” By “pattern” he means a “type” or a “model.” It’s hard to convey this in English. He’s saying that Adam is like a *copy* of someone else. The “someone else,” of course, is Jesus, the “one who was to come.” Both of them did *something* that had a *seismic* impact on *all* of humanity; it was a *cosmic* event that impacted everything *for all time*. Adam’s cosmic event was what Paul refers to as his “trespass” – his sin, his willful act of disobedience. Jesus’s cosmic event was what Paul calls his “free gift” – the free gift of his sacrificial death and resurrection.

Paul elaborates. “Many died through the one man’s trespass.” He’s talking about how Adam’s choice resulted in our loss of access to the tree of everlasting life. “The judgment following one trespass brought condemnation.” Adam’s choice had consequences; it resulted in God condemning him to die. “Because of the one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one.” We *all* die because of the choice that Adam made. “One man’s trespass led to condemnation for all.” We have *all* been condemned to death because of what he did. And “through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” We all have inherited the ability to make choices that are contrary to God’s will.

But Adam is a “pattern of the one who was to come,” Jesus Christ, who, like Adam, did something that changes *everything*. “The grace of God and the gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, [have] abounded for the many.” Because of what *Jesus* did, we experience *grace*. “The gift ... brings justification.” Justification is a fancy word that means God looks us as *righteous*, no matter *what* we have done. “Those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness [will] reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” Jesus imparts *grace* to us; Jesus gives us the gifts of *justification* and *righteousness*, and it’s not because of anything *we* have done; it’s all because of what *Jesus* has done. “Therefore just as one man’s trespass” – Adam’s trespass – “led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness” – Jesus’s act – “leads to justification and life for all. For just as through the one man’s disobedience” – Adam’s disobedience – “the many were made sinners, so through the one man’s obedience” – Jesus’s obedience – “the many will be made righteous.”

That is to say: everything that went *wrong* because of choices that were made in the Garden of Delight has been set *right* by the man who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Adam brought sin into this world; Jesus provided a means by which we could *escape* the consequences of sin. Adam’s choice brought death into this world; Jesus’s choice restored to us the hope of experiencing *eternal life*. Sin gives way to *justification* and *righteousness*, and the *tree of life* is once again available to us.

These are precious gifts. *Incredibly* precious gifts. Gifts that Jesus is offering you, *today*. *Right now*. You want forgiveness for all your sins? *You can have it!* You want life beyond death? *You can have that too!* What do you have to do? *Nothing!* Absolutely *nothing!* You can’t *earn* this. It doesn’t require any *effort*. You don’t have to do any works of *penance*. All that’s needed – the *only* thing that is necessary – is a simple *trust*. Jesus died *for you*. For your sins. For everything you have done – and everything you will do in the future – that’s not worthy of God. He took all your sins and nailed them to his cross. They’re *gone*. He’s washed them away. *You don’t have to worry about them anymore*. Jesus also *rose for you*. He charted a path from death to life, and paved a way for us to follow in his footsteps. We still have to die. He didn’t get to escape that, and neither do we. But wow, that’s not the end. *Your life doesn’t stop there*. There’s a future for you – *restoration, glory!* – on the other side.

These are *gifts*. They are *free*. Why? Because God loves you *that much*. Because you’re *that precious*. One of God’s beautiful creations, stained by forces outside your control, but now restored to your original glory by the one man’s obedience: Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. *Thanks be to God!*

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