



1 March 2020, Lent 1
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13;
Matthew 4:1-11
Show us Grace
First Mennonite Church

On this first Sunday of Lent, I would like to begin by talking about trees. Truth be told, when I read and studied this Genesis passage, I was intrigued by the role of the two trees in Genesis 2:

“Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9).

Not only are there an abundance of trees, but the trees are “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” (Genesis 2:9a). How do we understand these trees?

I take them to be a symbol of the incredible and luscious environment that the Lord God provides for all living creatures, including humans. All of this abundance means there is enough for all. That these trees are pleasant to the sight and good for food means they **satisfy two basic human needs:**

- our need for basic things to keep us alive **like food, water, and shelter**
- our need for **human aesthetics**

By aesthetic, I mean beautiful music, theatre, art, food, photography, and making a beautiful home. God is the gracious and abundant provider of these benefits. It follows then, that our responsibility is to love and care for this bountiful and wondrous creation God so generously provided.

But then in the midst of all of this incredible abundance and beauty, God placed two trees that are off limits.

And 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.’ (Genesis 2:16-17)

My question is, why did God provide us creatures with so much beauty and bounty and then impose restrictions? Before I answer this question, I will first tell you what I was taught about these two trees growing up. It went like this: God placed the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the garden as a **simple test**. Adam and Eve were not supposed to eat of its fruit. If they did, their disobedience would spell disaster for the human race. As a penalty, sin would take its tenacious hold on them and on all their offspring. This was called “the Fall”.



I suggest this is **NOT** a story about someone else, Adam and Eve; rather, it's a story about you and me. If you want to see what Adam and Eve looked like, go and look in a mirror. Their story is our story. They are us. God show us who we are through this story. So, the basic issue is not how **they** were tempted but how **we** succumb.

To read this story as Adam and Eve's story helps us to blame our ancestral parents for getting us into the mess our world is in today. At the same time, blaming them helps us feel some relief that it was **their** fault, not **ours**.

There are the two trees that stand in the midst of the garden: The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What is the purpose of these trees?

I take the first of these trees—the tree of life—to be a symbolic reminder that all life **comes** from God, is **protected** by God, and **returns** to God.

This tree of life reminds us not to violate life. Humans are not to take someone else's life or abuse another life. The tree of life acted as a boundary for our protection. It's there to protect us against violating and abusing life.

The second tree—the tree of knowledge—reminds us to rely on God's wisdom rather than our own. It is there to protect us, providing a boundary for our moral and ethical decisions. When we make these decisions, we make them in accordance with God's will rather than to trust our own self-serving judgment.

These trees **were not** placed in the garden as a test. God didn't run a sting operation against us, telling us not to touch or eat, and then spying on us from a distance to see if we would fail. No.

Why then did God provide us with so much abundance and then impose restrictions in the form of these two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

The short answer is that we don't do well without protective boundaries. Robert Frost said, "Good fences make good neighbours". That's true **if fences indicate where our authority ends**. God imposed limits on us, not to tempt or deprive us, but to allow us to thrive. The tree was not there to entice us to fail, but to offer us the privilege of responsible choice.



We warn children not to touch the stove because it is hot. We warn them not to eat certain berries because they are poisonous. But such warning **do not** apply here. The knowledge of good and evil and the promise of life are not evils to be avoided. **They are desirable and enticing gifts**. The human "*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...*" (Genesis 3:6)

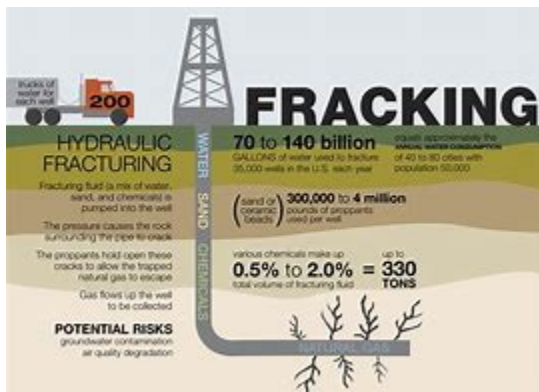
What then is the implied sin? I suggest the sin is to disregard the essential limits of being human, step beyond the boundary, and strive to be like God. This applies to issues of wealth and power, natural resources, and human relationships. And when you consider that the objects that were off-limits were not precious gems or mansions, but trees—nourishing and life-giving trees, then they apply to the environment as well. Their fruit was declared good to eat. But there are limits to legitimate indulgence even in what is good.



Some people love going to all-you-can-eat buffets. An endless plate loaded with all your favourite foods, all for one price, may seem like a great deal. It's enticing. Tempting to fill up your plate, and then go back for seconds or thirds. This is why these types of restaurants often put up signs stating, "Take what you want. Eat what you take."

This is a caution against over-indulging.

It is almost impossible to imagine life without petroleum, oil and gas that fuels our cars, heats our homes, and is the basis of all the plastic products in our homes. One of the methods used to extract oil is called fracking. Fracking injects millions of litres of water, sand and chemicals under high pressure into an oil well,



cracking the rock and releasing the natural gas and oil. But fracking pollutes enormous amounts of water. Also, places where fracking is common, now report increases in earthquakes. When we cause the earth itself to shudder, we have to ask whether petroleum, extracted by fracking, is gift or forbidden fruit. Just because we can, doesn't mean we should.

So often, what we do for the good of one might hurt another. That is true in war where the intention to secure freedom for one country devastates another. It is true in personal life where to satisfy our own needs and desires we may deeply hurt another. Indeed, good and bad, right and wrong are often not far apart.

This was the kind of temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness. At his baptism his divine identity was affirmed. This was followed by the temptation to use his newly ascribed authority to bring in the kingdom of God with dramatic flair rather than by adopting the suffering servant role as a model for his followers. Just as the serpent in the garden represents the inner voice that urges us to indulge in what lies beyond the boundary, so in the wilderness, the devil represents the conflict within Jesus regarding how he would use his divine power.

Adam and Eve's vocation was to tend the garden. The story of Jesus' temptation was also related to his assigned vocation. So we have to ask ourselves, in our vocation, whether that is as a volunteer, a teacher, a business person, a farmer, a parent, what are the risks of using our legitimate gifts and roles in a self-indulgent and self-serving manner? In other words, when and how do we over-reach and take selfish advantage of what we are entrusted to look after or who we are entrusted to serve?



A couple of weeks ago, the Boy Scouts of America filed for bankruptcy protection after several thousand men filed lawsuits claiming they were molested when they were scouts by scoutmasters or other scout leaders. Here were these leaders, given the role to teach,

mentor, guide these young boys, but instead they used the power of their position to abuse and devastate the lives of thousands. The “me too movement”, abuse in the church, the abuse and subsequent pain of indigenous peoples’ in residential schools—all of these horrible things happened because those in positions of power and influence over-stepped their legitimate role, abused their position for their own selfish ends.

Our story says the special trees were placed “In the middle of the garden”. I think this is not a reference geography but suggests that the quest for domination and control too often reside at the centre of human preoccupation.

Genesis 1-3 indicate how God derived satisfaction from what had been created, while Adam and Eve exploited it. God did not plant the special trees to tempt Adam and Eve. But when God showed up the lights were on but no-one was home. Adam and Eve hid themselves. Guilt and shame cause us to separate ourselves from the ones who matter most.

Hiding also suggests that they took their failure seriously. After all Genesis 2:17 warned “...for when you eat of it you will surely die.” That is serious language. Even though they were not struck down by a bolt of lightning it was not an idle threat. The reference to dying doesn't necessarily mean a threat of punishment. It can serve as a warning—**there will be consequences for your actions.** Of course,

their choice caused something vital to die in their relationship with God, with each other and within themselves.

What does God do? God seeks them out, not because God didn't know where they were, but sought them out so Adam and Eve could face themselves. God wants to show us who we are. God's question, **Adam, where are you** was posed, not for God's benefit, but for Adam's benefit in that it provoked self-examination. It was a spiritual question given so that Adam and Eve could honestly examine themselves, discover why they tried to evade God.

Think back on your own life when you did or said something that you shouldn't have said or done. What happened to that relationship? Did you try and hide from the truth? When we break fellowship is it because we have been rejected, or because of our shame of what we did or said? Do we walk away from others in order to avoid a face to face encounter?

The story goes on to say that God replaced Adam and Eve's wardrobe of fig leaves with garments of skin. If God did this, then why did God expel them from the garden? Didn't God forgive them? Yes, but anyone who has failed knows, **even after forgiveness there is no return to how it once was**. Once angry, spiteful words leave your mouth they are out there, and you can't bring them back. Once an evil act is done, you can't undo it.

In 2015, 927 people in Saskatchewan filed for a name change.¹ Some of those people were convicted criminals who wanted to change their names, possibly as a way to move forward with a new identity, but maybe as a way to cover up their past. Though they may move forward with a new identity, what they did in the past remains with them. Not all the consequences of failure can be erased just as the mark on Cain's forehead not only secured his safety but also bore evidence to his criminal record. He couldn't have one without the other. So the move from the idyllic garden to the harsher world represents a consequence of failure and sin. God may allow us to move forward forgiven, but we move forward with baggage.

And rather than understanding the reference to pain in childbirth as Eve's punishment, we could take it as a metaphor suggesting that new beginnings do not come without pain. Our historical mistreatment of our indigenous neighbours is not resolved with their offer of forgiveness but with the painstaking process of

¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/2558782/convicted-criminals-change-names-to-cover-up-past/>

making things right. Exploitation of our environment results in thorns and thistles, aka, climate change. We must deal and live with consequences even when forgiven.

But the most amazing thing is how **God shows us grace**. When we fail and when we sin, God covers us up and restores us. The consequences of our actions mean that we can't go back to how it was, back to the idyllic garden; we must move forward outside the garden. Incredibly, God remains present and available both inside and outside the garden.

Those who understand Genesis 3 in terms of the Fall, say this is why we **need** the Gospel. But I suggest that this story in Genesis 3 **is** the gospel.

The first three chapters of Genesis do not tell a story of our ancestors who messed life up permanently for their offspring after God had created a pristine universe. Nor is it the story of how God dangles temptation in front of us to test us. Rather, it is a graphic portrayal of the tension between desire and responsibility, between (over)indulgence and disciplined living. It is the story of how humans are called to conduct themselves in God's created order. Humans are called to live within specific boundaries.

When, not if, we find ourselves in Adam and Eve's position of failure may we have the courage to engage in honest self-evaluation. This is what Lent is all about. When we find ourselves responding to someone else who has failed, may we have the grace to restore rather than to condemn. Amen.