

The Tree Of The Knowledge Of Good And Evil

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-11

During this season before Easter, we are invited into a reflective and contemplative space. This is a season when we consider our own personal lives and our life's journey.

There are at least two things that people have found helpful in this reflective process. First, is the nature around us. Nature can be rejuvenating, renewing, refreshing. And nature can also be violent, unsettling, and challenging. Either way, nature impacts us, engages with us, and calls for a response.

A second thing that helps us reflect are good questions. A good question will help us to probe deeper, uncover hidden sentiments, struggles, joys, longings, and so much more. Good questions help us to connect with the deep marrow of life.

So, we are combining nature and questions from biblical stories as access points into our personal spiritual journeys.

John helped us begin this series last week when he talked from Psalm 1 about trees that are planted along a river and nourished by its waters.

Today we are jumping into one of the first stories from the book of Genesis at the beginning of the Jewish sacred scriptures.

READ GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-11

After this point in the story, both the man and woman experience guilt and begin a blame game. The man blames the woman, the woman blames the snake, and there are consequences to their actions.

This may be one of the most misunderstood stories in the Bible, so let's clear out of the way some of the common presumptions so that we can see more clearly the message.

First, sometimes this story is described as an explanation for how sin, evil, and death entered the world. This is our own worldview overlaid onto this ancient story. The story itself never goes into such an abstract analysis of origin stories, and nobody dies in the story.

Secondly, this story is often described as the story of "the fall"

of humanity from God's presence. Again, this is our Western mind trying to co-opt an ancient story to answer a question from our own time. Sure there is a choice made by people in relation to God's command and there are consequences, but a "fallen" state of humanity is actually not assumed here.

Instead of origins or a "fallen" state of humanity, the story is much more concerned with people's concrete response to God's gracious gift of life along with the challenges of a troubled and anxious situation with which people must deal.

This is a story that begins with God providing a garden which holds all kinds of goodness, all glory, all things needed for the full and rich enjoyment of life. Creating and offering the bountiful garden is an act of God's grace for all who might dwell in that space.

Rivers flow through the garden to sustain all life. Literally life flows unhindered and freely from the garden as a gift from God.

Think for a moment, and use your imagination to place this image of a life-giving garden in your own world. What is it that brings you richness of life?

1. Is it the relationships with your family or friends that totally energize you?

2. Does it have something to do with a family pet that curls up at your feet or in your lap such that time stops and you are filled with the presence of love?

3. Do you experience life-giving energy when you venture out for long walks alone or with a friend? Do you experience the sun shining on your face and a gentle, if not crisp, breeze nipping at your face reminding you of God's grace?

4. What about food? Beyond eating to simply live, is there richness of being alive that you touch when you have before you the smells, flavors, textures and colors of the most wonderful food assembled by your own hands, a loved-one's, or a favorite chef's?

5. Perhaps you are reminded about the gift of life by all of those little things that you notice through the day: the smile of a stranger, the feeling of vigor in your slightly exhausted body after climbing several flights of stairs, watching a leaf being blown by the wind, or the pop and crunch of a salted almond between your teeth, a sunset that quickly fades from vibrant reds and purples to oranges to pinks and finally to

deep blues as the sun dips below the tree line.

All of these and more remind us of the gracious gift of life that flows like an unending river from the hand of God. May we bask in the glow ... and give thanks for the garden of life.

In the center of this great garden is one tree that is unique among all the others. This tree, although it looks as glorious as the others, comes with a warning. Do not touch! Do not eat!

We don't know why. We are not given reasons — only the instruction.

This tree is not mentioned anywhere else in scripture and it seems its character is not as important as what it represents. It represents the seriousness of God's boundaries for living in the garden.

As beautiful and bountiful as the garden might be, God is also serious about the parameters for health and well being. The people who live inside God's glorious world have boundaries for their own well being.

We face boundaries all of the time. Some are imposed by local, state and federal law. Police have a job

to keep people in compliance with these laws so that all people might remain safe.

Other boundaries are created in our families, again for our own protection. Children are told not to touch the hot stove or to run out in traffic. They are told that when in public they must remain in view of the adult who is responsible for them: mom, dad, grandpa, aunt, babysitter, etc.

There are other boundaries set up to develop healthy habits in life, like: dessert can only be eaten after your meal. Or, homework needs to be done before any screen time. Bedtime is honored in order to gain enough sleep to keep the body and mind healthy.

Children don't always understand why the boundaries are set, but even so they need to follow them or face consequences.

Think of the other written, spoken, or even unspoken rules and boundaries in your life.

Often we find ourselves challenging and stretching the boundaries that govern our lives. We get curious what lies beyond them. The grass seems quite greener on the other side. We are enticed and curious, tempted.

Sometimes we might even feel entitled.

What do you know is not good for you, but is very, very tempting?

1. How many times have you been talking with friends who tell you some juicy and scandalous news about someone who is not present? The gossip is valued in those circles, so you pass it along and it boosts your ego and your social standing. You become the go-to person with new whispers. It is so easy to keep this cycle going.

What do you know is not good for you, but is very, very tempting?

2. More than a week ago, we caught on video someone in the church tempted when they figured nobody was watching. They stole something that was not their own. To be clear, this was in no way related to our hosting of people with the South Oakland Shelter. Honestly, the video was unsettling to watch.

Perhaps you also have been tempted to take something not your own, when you thought nobody was watching?

What do you know is not good for you, but is very, very tempting?

3. Maybe you are aware of the law concerning certain substances that are illegal to consume, but you have been curious or felt pressure from friends, so you step over the line and partake from time to time.

What do you know is not good for you, but is very, very tempting?

4. Maybe you are in a committed relationship, but when you travel for business, there are people you meet who are fun, interesting, exciting ... available ... so you rationalize why hanging out isn't cheating, and then drinks turn into more ...

Sounds like how the serpent argued, and how we rationalize ...

The serpent argued like a lawyer with rhetorical stealth to circumvent the boundary — but this exposed the couple, and left them no longer safe or free in the garden.

This is where disregarding God's limits leaves us — without safety or freedom.

A story that was full of the vigor and glory of life inside a gracious and expansive gift shrinks into a story centered inwardly about guilt, fear, crime and punishment. This is what happens when we are enticed

and grasp at what is not good for us.

Have you found yourself in that space?

Later in the story, God continues to provide life, even when death perhaps is warranted, but we aren't there yet. We still must face the fact that we have given in to temptation and we are living with its consequences.

What do you know is not good for you, but is very, very tempting?