

## FIRST CHOICE

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

The great American poet Robert Frost has a poem that I imagine we all are familiar with—a poem that so poignantly captures the notion of the choices that we make and the pivotal decisions that shape our lives. The poem, of course, is *The Road Not Taken*, and it tells of the choice a hiker makes when confronted with a path that splits off in two different directions into the forest. He makes a choice and selects to follow one path knowing it is unlikely that he will return to this place again. He realizes that he will never have the opportunity to see where the other path might have taken him, how it would have changed his life. At the end of the poem, the hiker says,

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

We are all aware of the choices that we make in our lives. Most are inconsequential—decaf or regular, paper or plastic. But there are those choices that will change the arc of our existence—who do we marry, what job will we accept, which town will we live in, what church do we join.

When we're young, choices can be overwhelming—the possibilities before us seem infinite. As we age, we discover that we are more in control of our fate than we first believed. It is less about the choices that we make, and more about who we are as people.

Our reading today is from the book of Genesis. It is part of the creation story. And it is also a story about choices. As Bible scholars, you all know that our Bible presents two separate accounts of creation. The first is found in chapter 1, and it is the seven-day creation story. It goes like this:

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void... Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. God goes on to create sky and earth and seas and plants and creatures and then finally humans. And we read: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*

That is the first account of creation. It is beautiful; it is cosmic; it accounts for all things. It illustrates God's unique power to create.

But that is not the only story. Immediately following this cosmogonic account, we discover the Garden of Eden creation story—a far more intimate account of our beginnings.

In this story, God does create *the earth and the heavens*. But the earth is dry and devoid of life. The first thing God does is to create life. We read, *Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*

At this point, this man has no name. But we find a wonderful play on words here in the original Hebrew. *The Lord God formed (adam) “man” from the (adamah) “dust” of the ground.* That the *adam* came from the *adamah* is a pointed reminder of our roots. We are not angels. We are not gods. We are part of creation.

God’s next step is to create a suitable place for this man to live. We read that God planted a garden in a land called Eden. But this isn’t just some vegetable garden out in the back yard, it is a realm. There are trees and plants that are not only beautiful to look at, but they provide food to eat. There are numerous rivers to bring water to this land. The also land contains gold and beautiful gemstones as well as trees that produce resin for a sweet perfume. It is a paradise.

The reading that I have selected for today tells us that, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.* The man has a job. This place is not some all-inclusive Caribbean resort where your every need is catered to. No, the man has a purpose here.

Furthermore, God instructs the being that he may eat freely of any fruit in the garden, however there is one tree, just one tree, that he must avoid. *Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat of that tree you shall die.* God gives the being a choice.

Our reading skips over the section which tells of the naming of all the animals. I think the Bible needs a footnote here to explain how we ended up with creatures known as the Spiny Lump sucker and the Satanic Leaf-Tailed Gecko.

Also, in this section, we find the account of the creation of a partner for the first being.

And then, we meet the famous snake. Church-language likes to call this creature a serpent, but it was just a snake. To be clear, this being is not Satan. It is just a wild animal, an inhabitant of God’s garden. The snake is unique in that it is *more crafty than any other wild animal.*

There is another wonderful play on words here. Earlier, the humans were described as being *arumim*—naked—while the snake was described as being *arum*—crafty. One translator elegantly captures the essence of this word play by

stating it this way: “The man and the woman were nude, and the snake was shrewd.”

The snake approaches the woman and says to her, “Excuse me, but did God say that you are not to eat of any tree in the garden?”

The woman responds saying, “No, that is not what God said. God said that we may eat of the fruit of any tree. However, God clearly told us, *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.*”

The snake says 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.* What we need to notice here is that the snake is not lying. The snake is crafty and shrewd and is a manipulator, but the snake does not lie to the woman. The man and the woman do eat the fruit, they don't die—at least not immediately. But they do die to their way of life. Their paradise is lost. The snake's implication was that God is hiding something from the humans. By eating the forbidden fruit their eyes were opened and they could see the world in ways that they had not seen before, they will know good and evil, and they will be like God.

So the man and the woman eat the particular fruit of the tree that is in the center of the garden and their eyes are opened and they immediately realize they are naked. This, of course, refers back to the previous pun. And their nakedness is offered up in contrast to the craftiness of the serpent. In response to their state of undress, they sew some fig leaves into a sort of sash to cover themselves. The hearers of this story would have laughed at this because a fig leaf is rough and spiky and not what you would want touching your tender parts. At least it is better than poison ivy.

This story of the snake and the fruit is typically viewed as an explanation of humanity's fall from grace. The man and the woman were living in an idyllic paradise but they did the one thing God told them not to do—they sinned. And for that, they—and all humanity—were removed from God's garden.

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However, on this first Sunday in Lent, as we begin our journey of self-reflection to the cross, I would like to offer another approach to this story. It is a story about purpose. Our reading began with the verse, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.* This word ‘till’ is not the best translation here. It is a throwback to the old King James translation. A better translation would be “work/serve.” The humans were placed in the garden to work the garden.

To till implies control and power. We till a field to make it more productive, to make it give us what we want. To serve the garden is something else entirely. That

suggests a partnership with the land, a sense of stewardship. Remember, the plants and trees already provided food. There was no need to till. The people only needed to tend to this creation.

Then there is the word keep—the humans were put in the garden to work it and keep it. Again, a more accurate translation of that word keep would be “protect/guard.” Keeping implies ownership, as in ‘I keep my lawn looking nice.’ To protect a thing, on the other hand, implies compassion. The humans were placed in the garden by God to serve and protect. The created beings have a clear and powerful purpose in this creation. When asked, “What do you do?” the man and the woman can say, “I protect God's creation.”

In this story, the woman and the man live in a world created by God. They have sustenance and they have a purpose ordained by God. But they do the one thing they've been told not to do and for this they are removed from the garden. In this removal, they find themselves in an alternate reality—a reality of death, a reality in which they recognize their nakedness before God, a reality of pain and isolation, a reality in which they have lost their purpose.

This story is not just about choice—about eating or not eating the forbidden fruit—this story is about humans having a place in creation.

All of us, at some point, have felt lost or adrift. We have felt all alone living a life devoid of purpose. We feel that we are born, then we die, and hopefully we did something memorable in the middle.

It is our faith that reminds us that even in this life, God is with us. And what God offers us now is not a garden but a kingdom—a kingdom in which our divine purpose is to care for creation as we care for one another. As we find stated again and again in scripture, God desires that we love God, love our neighbor, and care for those in need. That is our purpose in God's kingdom.

This past Wednesday marked the start of the season of Lent. And on that day, we received the mark of ashes as a visible reminder that “We are dust and to dust we shall return.” We are not gods. We are not angels. But we are loved by our creator. The season of Lent is the time for us, as people of faith, reflect on our purpose, to embrace our role of serving God's kingdom.