

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

I recall vividly a particular moment part-way through my first year in college. I was part of a group—all freshmen—that had become friends, struggling together and supporting one another through our first year of college. I remember that we got to talking about the other schools we had applied to and had been accepted to. And we realized that if we had made different choices then our lives would be different. We would at that moment be at different places with different friends. Yes, this was just the sort of deep conversation you have when you are 18 years old.

At the beginning of the year, at freshman orientation, all the freshmen were gathered in the auditorium and the dean of students told us to look at the person sitting next to us. You are going to spend four years together, he said. Conceivably, he said, you might end up marrying the person next to you. We all looked around and laughed nervously. I was sitting next to a girl I knew from home and we had been friends for many years—still are. We never dated or anything but her father was a Presbyterian minister and eight years later he would help me secure my first position in ministry that would bring me to Tennessee. And while at that first church, I met my wife.

The great American poet Robert Frost has a poem with which we are all familiar—a poem that beautifully captures this notion of the choices we make and the decisions that shape our lives. The poem, of course, is *The Road Not Taken*, and it tells of the choices a hiker makes when confronted with a path that splits in two directions into the forest. He chooses one path knowing it is unlikely that he will return to this place again. In the poem's final stanza 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.

Our reading today is from the creation account in Genesis. It is a story of choices. As you know, our Bible has two accounts of creation. The first is found in chapter 1 and is the seven-day account of creation. At the end of each day, God declares it 'good.'

In chapter 2 we find the Garden of Eden creation story. In this story, God creates "the earth and the heavens." God creates man from the dirt of the ground. Or, as we read in Hebrew, God creates the *adam* from the *adamah*.

God then takes this being and places him in the garden of Eden. The man's purpose in the garden is, *to till it and keep it*. 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 naming of the animals as well as the creation of the woman. It should be pointed out that the woman was created as a help-mate, a partner, an equal to the man.

In chapter 3 we meet the serpent. This is not Satan but a wild animal that is described as being *more crafty than any other wild animal*. There is a wonderful play on words here. The humans were earlier described as naked, *arumim*, and the serpent is described as being crafty, or *arum*. One translator elegantly captures this meaning in English by putting it this way: “The man and the woman were nude, and the snake was shrewd.”

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

The woman responds to the serpent saying, “No, that is not what God said. We may eat of the fruit of any tree, but God clearly 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.*”

The serpent tells 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 serpent is not lying. The serpent is crafty and shrewd and is a manipulator, but the serpent does not lie to the woman. When the woman and man eat the fruit, they don't die—at least not immediately. Eventually, they will die. They also die to their way of life. The serpent's implication is that God is hiding something from the humans. By eating the forbidden fruit their eyes will be opened and they will see the world in ways that they had not seen before, they will know good and evil, they will be like God.

So the man and the woman eat the particular fruit and their eyes are opened and they realize they are naked. This refers back to the previous pun. Their nakedness is offered up in contrast to the craftiness of the servant. 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..

This story of the serpent 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 were removed from the garden.

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However, on this first Sunday of Lent as we begin our journey of self-reflection to the cross, I would like to offer another approach this story. It is a story about purpose. Our reading begins with the verse, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.* The 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 put 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. Then there is the word keep—the humans were put in the garden *to till 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 implies compassion. The humans were placed in the garden by God to serve and protect. The being has 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 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 in which they have lost their purpose.

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

All of us, at some point, feel lost or adrift, we feel alone living a life absent of purpose. We feel that we are born, then we die, and hopefully we did something 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 purpose is to care not just for creation but for one another. As we find stated over and over in scripture, God wants us to love God, to love our neighbor, and to care for those in need. That is our purpose in God's kingdom.

The cross of Jesus Christ is a symbol of God's power to change reality, to bring purpose to those who wander aimlessly. God offers us a purpose in the kingdom. I pray that we chose to accept it.

Amen.