

The Garden and the Wilderness

Genesis 3:1-7 Romans 5:12-19 Matthew 4:1-11

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When was the last time you had to study for a final exam? Whether we are in school right now or not, most of us can remember what it felt like to take a test. And testing is not limited to the classroom.

In Genesis we have heard the story of the first final exam ever administered. Creation's first two students were Adam and Eve. At Paradise University, an eastern school (probably "ivy-league"), they had enrolled in an interdisciplinary course dealing with ecological science, social ethics, and religious studies. They seemed to be progressing rather well, as seen by the report that early in the semester the professor had pronounced them "very good." But then came exam time. We are told that a certain snake in the grass disguised himself as a TA, and began asking questions.

"Did the professor say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" So far it sounds like a simple true and false quiz, but Eve must have been studying for an essay exam.

"We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but the professor did say, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" That part of the lecture she had committed to memory, no doubt motivated by the fact that it seemed particularly relevant to her effort to make a living after graduation.

But now this sneaky TA reveals what he really thinks of the old professor. "Ah, c'mon. You don't really believe that, do you? You won't die! The Prof. just knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, you'll know as much as the professor does, and then instead of taking courses you could be teaching them."

Now here is where the story takes a great departure from our more familiar experiences in school. Contrary to what some would have us believe, the professors that teach the courses you and I have taken did not know everything there is to know on that particular subject. Education, in its finest sense, is not supposed to be a professor with a full pitcher pouring the juice of knowledge into the heretofore-vacant heads of students. There is the possibility of some give and take in the educational process, and the responsibility on the student's part to think critically about the information presented in the classroom. The professor, after all, is not God.

Ah, but therein lies the distinction between our common educational experiences and the book of Genesis. Adam and Eve's Prof. was God. The serpent was suggesting that Adam and Eve could go on through graduate school, secure their Ph.D.'s, and then apply for eternal tenure. They could take their old professor's job and rewrite the textbooks!

The serpent needed only to utter the suggestion and the result was inevitable. They could not resist the temptation to question God's judgment, to themselves judge their judge. Adam and Eve are everyman and everywoman. Created in the image of God we share with God the capacity to express our pleasure with creation, and also to express

our displeasure. We succumb to the temptation to put ourselves in the place of God, to call into question God's righteousness, to envy God's power, to seek to alter the basic design of creation in ways that might better suit our interests.

"Gee, if I were God, just think of the things I could do. There are lots of things around here that need fixing-up, like mosquitoes and earthquakes... and people. They could sure be put together a lot better, couldn't they?" It may seem a bit far-fetched, but it is very real. This is what Christian doctrine calls "original sin." From Adam and Eve on, over and over again, we have endeavored to put ourselves at the center of the universe, and in so doing tried to push God out of the way.

"I want to be in charge, in control, not subject to taking orders from anyone else." Adam and Eve thought they had a chance to be like God. They jumped at the opportunity. That is when they failed the test, left the garden, and entered the wilderness.

The wilderness is where Jesus was when he was tempted by the devil, but here is where a different story is told. It is another final exam story, but with a different ending.

This time the professor takes the place of the student, becoming vulnerable to all the stresses and consequences to which the student is subject, and this time the test is passed.

God took our test for us. We proclaim that God was in Christ through the incarnation, at his birth, on the cross, in the resurrection. God was there also as Satan was tempting Jesus.

Most people of Jesus' day knew what kind of Messiah they wanted. They wanted a few miracles. They wanted a display of power. They wanted a God-King who was going to shape-up all these petty little human kingdoms. These desires are given voice by the image of Satan in the fourth chapter of Matthew. "Turn these stones into bread.... Throw yourself down from this pinnacle.... Establish your absolute rule as the greatest king on earth." But Jesus rejected the temptation to be that kind of popular leader.

He rejected it not just once at the beginning of his ministry, but as it faced him again and again in his journey toward the climax of his ministry.

He told his disciples that he must suffer many things, and be killed. Peter protested, but Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!"

On the cross we hear the people yell, "If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross," but he rejected that temptation as well.

The story of the Garden of Eden is not simply a tale about something that happened one day. It is not about an incident that ended one way but could have ended another. The story is descriptive of what it means to be human, – not only our sin, but also our curiosity, ingenuity and courage – it is all wrapped together. The point of the story is not to place blame. It is not, "Well, if that first couple hadn't messed things up, we would all be living on easy street!" The story is descriptive of the human predicament. The story is eternally true.

Likewise, the story of Jesus is not just about one man that happened to show up in history at a particular time and place. Jesus' story is descriptive of the redemption that has always been available to humanity – in the man Jesus we see the pre-existent and ever-present Christ of God. In Jesus' story we see the vision of human possibility. Paul spoke of Adam as being of the "type" of one who was to come. The First Adam and the Second Adam are, for Paul, archetypes of the Old Creation and the New Creation. Adam is who we always are; Jesus is who we eternally can be.

When there is pain in our world it pains God; and the scriptures witness that even the incarnate God is tempted to end suffering and set the world right with a sweeping stroke of power. But the temptation is rejected. To do that would mean that creation would no longer be a living thing. It would become more like a great universal computer that could be programmed on some heavenly keyboard.

That is not the nature of the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. God chooses not to program us, but to love us. God chooses not to reign over us with a terrible power, but to come to us as a servant. God's choice to love is a costly choice, but it is the only one that allows us to be free human beings.

God has taken the test for us, and in so doing has inspired us to obedience through love. We are still tempted to try and play the role of God that even God has rejected. We are tempted by that still popular image of the miracle-working Messiah. We are tempted to seek power rather than to give love. We are tempted to take the easy way out of the wilderness by turning stones into bread. We are tempted to avoid pain by flying above the sharp spires of the city, instead of walking shoulder to shoulder with those who suffer. We are tempted to solve local and global conflicts by imposing our own solutions on others. But that is not the right answer.

Dealing with these temptations is the most important test we ever take. No amount of note taking or reading or studying or cramming will help us past this test. The grace of God is our salvation! It is the love of God touching our hearts, inspiring and illiciting a free response to turn from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. This grace which is our salvation is the love that chooses to come and be with us in our wilderness. Because God was in Christ, participating in our human condition, overcoming temptation, and because Christ is in us, we too can overcome temptation and choose to love.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, the season that prepares us for Easter. Jesus beckons us to follow him on the road that prepared him for Easter, the road to the cross, the road of love. Jesus beckons us this day to say no to a world that tempts us to try and take control of God's creation, and instead to love as we have been loved. O God, help us.