

**GOOD FOR FOOD**  
**Genesis 3:1–7; Matthew 4:1–11**

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on March 5, 2017, the First Sunday of Lent,  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Genesis 3:1–7**

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’*

*The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God 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.”’*

*But the serpent said 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.’*

*So when the woman 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, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

**Matthew 4:1–11**

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’*

*But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’*

*Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’*

*Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’*

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

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Several years ago, on Remembrance Sunday, I shared in a sermon that when I studied Old Testament for the first time at Union Seminary in New York, the professor, Dr. George Landes, took a piece of white chalk and wrote on a green board at the head of the class the words “After the Fall.”

He said that in order to understand the Old Testament – and perhaps more importantly our place in the world – we need to understand there is a great divide between the way God created us to be and the way we became.

- In Genesis 1 and 2, God creates the world as he intends it and creates the human creature in his image. Humanity and nature are at peace with one another. There is neither shame nor fear. The world is literally a paradise.
- But in Genesis 3, only the third chapter of the Bible, engaged in conversation with a snake, the original woman (who had not yet been named Eve) partakes of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which God has specifically limited the man and woman from eating. She passes the fruit on to her husband (who has not yet been directly referred to as Adam) and he eats as well.
- At this point, the created order ceases to function in the way God created it to function, but rather functions in the way we know it to function.
  - Instead of seeing the “good and evil” they had hoped to see, the man and woman see only their own nakedness, and they experience for the first time shame, then fear.
  - A rift occurs between snake and woman, humanity and God, nature and God.
  - The man assesses blame, first on the woman, then on God.
  - The woman is inflicted with a deep desire for the bearing of children, yet such bearing occurs in pain.
  - The man must now savagely struggle with the soil for it to yield its fruit that he and his family might eat.
  - The two sons born to this union break out, as adults, into an argument in front of the altar of God concerning whose offering to God is superior, and the presenter of the mysteriously unchosen offering, Cain, is so enraged that his face becomes disfigured, and he kills his brother Abel, in the first act of human violence, murder, patricide, domestic violence, religious war, the drawing of blood and taking of life over whom God accepts and whom God appears not to accept.
  - After Flood and rescue, ark and animals, dove of peace and sexual violation in his drunkenness of Noah by one of his sons, the gift of language originally used by God to create the heavens and the earth and used by the original man to welcome through poetry and music the original woman falls further than it had in the serpent’s tongue as human beings can no longer communicate with one another across differences in language beneath the Tower of Babel. The beauty of the two becoming “one flesh” has now become the many scattering from one another filled with babble.

All of these phenomena:

- Shame
- Fear
- Breach between male and female, humanity and nature, humanity and God
- Domestic violence
- Religious violence
- Nature’s fury
- Near unbridgeable differences between human beings across divides of language, culture, race, ethnicity, religion

All these flow from what is called the Fall, and all of it describes not the way God created the world, but the way the world has become. None of it is God's intention. None of it is God's will. None of it is God's ultimate hope for us. But all of it marks the way things are – in the words on the blackboard – “After the Fall.”

## I.

How did we get here as human beings, as the human race?

In many ways, we got here with the best of intentions.

A few weeks ago my college roommate came to town, as he does every year or so to lecture at NIH on issues around kidney and liver transplantation, which he has been teaching at the medical school of the University of Alabama-Birmingham for over 25 years. Bob remains a reluctant and restless Southern Baptist, uncomfortable with the fundamentalism that has become the norm in that denomination since the 1980s, but never quite able to leave that tradition in which he was reared because of its music and the choir in which he and his wife sing every Sunday.

Bob has one of the best theological minds I have ever known, one of the best minds on any topic for that matter. At a restaurant at Reagan, we somehow got to talking about the Biblical narrative of the Fall, the narrative we just read. I asked Bob what the text tells us the *motivation* was behind the woman eating the fruit of the tree from which God had prohibited she and her husband from eating.

“Disobedience,” Bob said quizzically.

Since I had more or less baited him with the way I asked the question, I responded: “I know that disobedience is the traditional answer. It is what we have been taught all our lives. But notice what the text specifies the nature of the disobedience. Not what the text specifies as her motivations. I began to recite Genesis 3:6 from memory, bungled it a little bit, but later texted him the exact words:

When the woman 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*,  
She took of its fruit and ate;  
And she also gave some to her husband,  
Who was with her,  
And he ate.

*“Good for food...a delight to the eyes...desired to make one wise.”*

While the act of eating was indeed one of disobedience, the woman didn't say: “I'm going to disobey God today.” Rather, her motives were responding to the best within her:

- Nourishment
- Beauty
- Knowledge

In eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the woman and man were not giving into or falling into some base, lower nature; rather they were rising, extending themselves, aspiring to exceed and excel. They were responding to all that is good and noble, hopeful and helpful, not base or demeaning: Nourishment, beauty, knowledge.

What's not to like?

## II.

If we fast forward to the Gospel lesson for today, just as the man and woman were at the beginning of the human endeavour, Jesus is at the beginning of his ministry. Just as they are “tempted” in the garden by one of the creatures God has made, the snake, Jesus is tempted directly by an adversary, the “evil one,” “*diabolos*,” whom Matthew calls “the devil.”

What does the “diabolical one” offer Jesus:

- The opportunity of turning stone into bread for nourishment, for his own famishment or for feeding the hungry of the world
- The opportunity of throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple to be rescued publicly in a feat worthy of the soon to be “late” Ringling Brothers’ circus, creating instant faith among the masses who would witness or bear witness to the drama of magic
- The opportunity to receive all the political and economic power of the kingdoms of the world so as to bring in the will and way of God among all the nations of the world by fiat rather than freedom.

Again:

- Nourishment
- Drama
- The knowledge and therefore power to change the world.

This is not a temptation to fall into some base, lower nature, some grubbiness of the human spirit, some darkness of the human soul. It is a temptation to strive, to achieve, to exceed previous limits.

Again, what's not to like?

## III.

But the trouble is it is often the case that when we seek to *exceed* who we are – as individuals, as the human race, as the people of God – we fall and bring about if not death and destruction at least a life marked more by bane than by blessing, more by heartache than by hope. While our hearts are often stirred by the final lines of “Invictus,” or similar poems or songs exalting the human spirit, the truth is

I am [not] the master of my fate,  
I am [not] the captain of my soul.<sup>1</sup>

The Fall was a matter of reaching, of rising, of overreaching, and thus of *hubris* and *Titanism*. It is when the first man and first woman stopped being the creatures they were created to be – and sought to be something more – that they ironically stumbled, fell, and brought into the world a sin and suffering neither they nor it had previously known.

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<sup>1</sup> “Invictus,” by Willam Ernest Henley, 1875.

By contrast, it was and is Jesus' refusal to exceed who he was sent to be – his refusal to accept the significant and appealing offer of the devil to create faith in people by turning stone into bread, by throwing himself off the temple and dazzling people with magic and drama, and by ruling through unmatched knowledge and political power – it was his *refusal* to accept these that kept Jesus on his path as Savior, Redeemer, Messiah – all the way to the cross and resurrection.

A hymn we will sing at the conclusion of the service captures this commitment he had to remaining who he was sent to be:

Jesus walked this lonesome valley.  
He had to walk it by Himself;  
O, nobody else could walk it for Him,  
He had to walk it by Himself.

Unlike Adam and Eve in the Garden, Jesus stayed true to who he was sent to be: “He walked this lonesome valley.”

#### IV.

So what does all this mean for us?

We are in an odd situation in our nation, our culture, our city, of seeming to have nearly as much opportunity as the original inhabitants of the Garden. While we do not live in paradise, and we long ago began to experience guilt and shame,

- Between us in this room we have about as much knowledge and awareness of the world as anyone could ask
- Even though our nation is politically divided and times are not filled with consensus, many if not most of us in this room able to live a little above the fray with relative security
- Just as the Garden provided near limitless blessings for its two original inhabitants, we have in our lives nearly limitless blessings of health, health care, prosperity, knowledge, culture, travel, art, education and religious expression, and yes, beauty.

Yet what may be our downfall more than anything else is the same thing that led Adam and Eve astray: that temptation to be or do or know or have or seek more than what is rightly within our purpose and purview to have. Maybe, just maybe, we are aspiring to something beyond who we are.

- It may be in the most personal aspect of our life.
- It may be in the closest, most intimate relationship we have.
- It may be in our family.
- It may be in dreams and hopes for our children, our grandchildren.
- It may be in our education.
- It may be in our vocation.
- It may be in our avocation.
- It may be in our religious life.
- It may be in our church.
- It may be in what we seek for this community in which we live.
- It may be in what we seek for this nation of which we are part.

- It may be in what we seek for this world in which our nation still plays an important role or from which it withdraws only at the world's peril.

In any one of these areas of life, it may be that we are seeking to exceed the limits of who we are, of who we are created to be.

When Jesus said "No" three times to the Diabolical One, the Devil eventually backed down, and suddenly angels came and waited on Jesus. Then soon Jesus soon heard he heard that his forerunner John the Baptist had been arrested. He withdrew to Galilee to the north. He began to proclaim exactly that which he was called to proclaim: "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." He called his first disciples, gave the Sermon on the Mount, cleansed a leper, healed a soldier's servant. And on and on.

"[Jesus] walked this lonesome valley" by doing what he was intended to do, nothing more, nothing less.

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This week I came across a verse in the Book of Deuteronomy I'll close with. It is Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things belong to the Lord our God,  
But the revealed things belong  
To us and to our children forever...

Whether you are a teenager trying to figure out your purpose and place, a young adult for whom many purposes and places seem open, a person in the middle years of life in which constancy has been the norm or change the constant, or someone nearing years of retirement and rest, in whatever way God reveals your place, your purpose, go with that, stick with that, leave the secret things with God in the Garden where they belong and to which you will someday be restored.

Amen.