

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
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“Eden: Of Apples and Snakes”
Genesis 3:4-6

Today we continue our series “Eden,” which we started just last week. If you missed our first week, this series through the rest of this month and into the beginning of August is focusing in depth on one and only one chapter of Scripture, Genesis chapter 3, which we’ll be going through verse by verse, really just looking at a handful of verses each week. Special thanks again to Pastor Mark who outlined this series for us, and with any luck and by God’s grace I won’t botch what he had envisioned for this week.

The reason we are taking such a close look at this one chapter is twofold. First, about once a year we’ll try to do a series like this—a close reading of a pivotal text in Scripture—and for any number of reasons that will be, we hope, a change of pace that guides us to slow down and truly consider the impact of the Word of God before us. And second, because this chapter is truly one of those pivotal texts, commonly known as The Fall, in which humanity turned from God, and in so doing changed everything. And so throughout this text we’ll be asking, what does this tell us about God? And what does this tell us about us, about ourselves?

If you were with us last week when we started this series, we took a look at the pristine, harmonious existence enjoyed by the man and the woman in the garden, described at the end of chapter two as being naked and yet were unashamed, meaning they were fully exposed before God, and yet felt completely at home, at peace. Not so much the case afterward, as we’ll see. But we also saw some of the seeds of doubt that were planted early on, namely in the question of a certain creature, one that has been the center of much discussion, consternation, maybe even fascination over the centuries, and one whose words led directly to humanity’s fall: the serpent. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now: for whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,
That she repeals him for her body's lust;
And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,

And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

If we have any English teachers out there—and I'm married to one, so every so often it means y'all are going to get literary stuff—you might recognize those words. Those lines are from Shakespeare's play *Othello*, and they are a soliloquy by the play's villain, Iago, not to be confused with the parrot of the same name. If you're familiar with the play, you'll remember that it's about how this villain Iago plots and schemes to destroy his general Othello, but not by fighting him or defeating him in combat, but by deceiving him, by leading him to believe that his wife Desdemona was unfaithful, having an affair with another of Othello's captains named Cassio and—those are the names mentioned earlier—and then stoking Othello's jealousy to the point of vengeance.

Just how Iago accomplishes this is pretty scary. It's scary first because, if not for his asides to the audience telling us that he is actively plotting to destroy Othello, you'd think for the most part he's being a decent guy. Honest Iago, he's called over and over again. He could appear to be sincere, wanting only to be honest with his superior, or supportive of his friends, but all the while wrapping a lie with the truth, planting seeds of doubt in Othello's mind about his wife's faithfulness that lead ultimately to pretty much everyone's death or downfall, including his own. And that duplicity is all part of his scheme, captured in those lines we heard a moment ago: "Divinity of hell! When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows."

But the second reason it's so scary is you don't know why he's doing it. You don't know why he hates Othello or why he has cooked up this devious plan to destroy him body and soul, no matter the cost or collateral damage. He gives hints of it here and there, but Iago's motivation is one of those endlessly debated topics among Shakespeare scholars. Was he bitter because he was passed over for a promotion? Was it racism toward Othello? Was he wrathful because of an affair his own wife had had with Othello? Or was he just a sociopath? Those are just some of the theories, each one with hints, but never fully explained. It's just evil, destructive evil, that doesn't look at all destructive at first.

Does that sound familiar? An evil that puts on a sincere face but all the while planting seeds of doubt? We heard a bit of that last week, didn't we? The serpent in the garden, there with the man and the woman, described as craftier than any of the wild animals, does the very same thing. Just asks a question at first, that's all, just asking an honest question. And then in v. 4, a bit more boldly, telling 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." But sets in motion the doubt and envy that would lead to humanity's fall.

You might be wondering, what's the serpent got against these people to deceive them? And like with Iago, there are hints, but never a clear explanation. Genesis never gives any reason why this serpent in the garden would want to deceive these people, especially given what's at stake.

If this story is one you're familiar with, you may be familiar already with how this serpent has most commonly been identified, that is, the devil, Satan, the personification of evil, the fallen angel who led a rebellion against God in heaven, but now takes the form of a serpent to deceive humanity and corrupt this new creation.

Satan's connection with the serpent in the garden has been pretty consistent throughout much of the church's history. Here's the thing though. It's not from the Bible, at least not

directly. The chapter here in Genesis never says the serpent was the devil. Never identifies the serpent as anything more than just a serpent. Nowhere in the Bible is there anything that says, “It was Satan who deceived Adam and Eve in the garden,” or “It was the devil who took the form of a serpent in the garden.” Nowhere. The closest it comes is in Revelation 12:9, which says, “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world,” but it still doesn’t directly say, it was Satan in the garden who tempted Adam and Eve to sin.

So what are we to make of it then? Does the power of this story rise or fall based on whether we think it’s Satan, the devil, there in garden with them? I don’t think so. In fact, I think the more we focus on the dirty tricks the serpent pulls, the more we’re tempted to let ourselves off the hook, and the easier it gets to pass this off as supernatural trickery, instead of something all too human.

When it comes down to it, the serpent didn’t lie. That might be a surprising thing for a preacher to say. What’d you talk about in church today? Well, the preacher was defending the snake in the Garden of Eden. That’s not what I hope you take from this, but the serpent didn’t lie. What he said was definitely misleading, and with the intent to deceive, but he didn’t lie.

“You will not die,” he says, which is in some respects true. They would not drop down dead instantaneously if they ate the fruit. They’d die eventually, but not instantly. “For God knows,” he follows, “that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened.” That’s also true. God would know that, but it’s said in a way to infer that God knows it but doesn’t want them to know it, and therefore wants to withhold it from them. “And you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Again, true. The word for God here is ambiguous—could mean the proper noun God or the plural noun gods—but either way, knowing good and evil is precisely the result of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—seems kind of obvious—a godlike quality, and that’s what happens. But it’s said in a way that infers that eating the fruit would make them God, on the same level as God.

And that’s all the serpent does. Doesn’t lie outright, but misleads. And we take it from there.

In v. 6, “the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise.” You can start to see the wheels turning in her mind.

In front of me, this tree with its fruit, which looks delicious, and more than that somehow seems to look the part of a tree that would give knowledge and wisdom, make me like God, and that’s something I want. But there was something else too. Something the serpent said. “For God knows,” he said. What does God know that he’s not telling us? Is he hiding something from us? Is there something he doesn’t want us to find out? If he’s hiding something from us that could be to our benefit, does God really have our best interest at heart? Can we even trust him? What was I worried about again? Dying? How do I know that’s even true? If God didn’t tell me everything about one thing, maybe he wasn’t telling me everything about that either. Maybe that’s just not true. Maybe this fruit right in front of me, maybe that’s the answer. Maybe I’d be better off. Maybe I’d be less dependent upon God for everything. Maybe I could do a better job of things. I know God said not to, but now I’m not so sure. What could it hurt?

“She took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.”

And the damage was done.

This weekend is one in which as a nation the United States celebrates independence, the birth of a county, and with it the values espoused in the declaration of that independence. “We

hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And as a foundation of government, that warrants celebration. Notions of equality and equal opportunity, of individual freedom, of self-reliance and self-determination; these can be good things, and within our nation, as citizens of this country yes but more importantly as citizens of the kingdom of God we should seek that those values of life and liberty truly are afforded justly and equally to all.

But there’s a dark side to the pursuit of happiness, one that we find in the garden. When it turns into getting all you can, gathering unto yourself all that you want, gaining for yourself every achievement in the name of the pursuit of, call it happiness, call it knowledge, call it the divine, it can quickly become about what you want, and that you are the one best suited to get it. When it gets to that point, the damage is done.

When we are in the garden, faced with the misleading words of a faceless evil, tempted by the allure of taste and sensation as well as knowledge and the prospect of divinity, and mistrusting of a God who had provided everything, we opt to take matters into our own hands, and in our pride, think ourselves as women and men equal to the task. The damage is done.

But there is another man, many years after this, who would himself face evil and the misleading words of temptation, not in a garden surrounded by the reminder of everything God had given, but in the wilderness reminded of what he had not. But where we fell, he resisted. He stood. And it is in his faithfulness that we have hope.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**