

### **Genesis 2:15-17 (NRSV)**

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

### **Genesis 3:1-7 (NRSV)**

#### *The First Sin and Its Punishment*

*(Rom 5.12—21)*

**3** 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?’” <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>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.’” <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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 (NRSV)**

#### *The Temptation of Jesus*

*(Mk 1.12—13; Lk 4.1—13)*

**4** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup>But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>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.’”

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’ ”

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## Misplaced Desire

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11*

The story of the Garden of Eden. The story of Paradise, the serpent, the apple and the fall. The story of the Adam and Eve. Often called the story of original sin. It is a story that in recent times has gotten a bit of a bad name. Feminists, scholars and congregants alike, have rightly objected when the blame for everything falls to Eve. Eve takes a bite. She seduces poor old Adam. And forever one strand of interpretation has labeled women as the seductresses of men. The other objection to the story is in a sense even more basic. For some dispute the claim that human beings are fallen at all. They say it is too negative a characterization of humanity.

Brian Hehir, the Catholic theologian, often quips to the second objection, that as far as he can tell original sin is the one doctrine of the church for which there is empirical evidence. I have to say that I don't think much about original sin as a doctrine; however, I think the story of the Garden of Eden gives us wonderful insights into the human nature, insights that even today are as operative as they were in the ancient days of earth's first humans. And to call that nature fallen isn't far off the mark. On the other hand, to blame Eve, or women, for humanity's fall would be to miss the point entirely.

Adam and Eve are in paradise. In paradise there is enough to eat. In paradise there is no resentment or rivalry. There is no greed or envy. Even human nakedness has no negative connotations. In paradise a loving God gives God's creatures all they need, and God's creatures live in a state of complete contentment.

They live in complete contentment until the snake shows up. The crafty snake. More crafty than any wild creature God had made we are told. The crafty snake disrupts the equilibrium. The crafty snake disturbs paradise. And just how does the snake wreck this pastoral scene? The snake teaches humankind how to lust after something they never before thought they needed to lust after. God had put a tree in the garden and said, "Please leave that one alone." And all was well while Adam and Eve understood God as their loving creator and benefactor.

The snake alters Adam and Eve's world in two very important ways. The snake teaches them to see the world through his eyes, rather than through their own, or through God's. The snake teaches them to see God through his eyes. Suddenly the snake introduces the idea that there is something valuable that they don't have. "Oh, that tree over there. That tree, it's a great thing. You eat the fruit from that tree and some amazing things are going to happen. You eat that fruit and you're going to know good and evil. Man you eat the fruit from that tree and you're going to be just like God. That's why God doesn't want you eating that tree over there. God doesn't want you to be as smart as he is."

Bingo. In one fell-swoop the snake gets them to see and value things through his eyes. They had no desire for the tree until the snake suggested that they should have. They have no rivalry with God until the snake teaches them to see God through the snake's crafty vision. They

think they should have the fruit and God's knowledge only because the snake has suggested it. So the first part of original sin, the first insight the story tells us of humankind, is that we are suggestible to a huge fault. If the snake says we should have it, then we begin to want it.

Modern day advertisers are as crafty as the snake. They know how easy it is to get us to see things through the eyes of others and to want things we would have never thought to have wanted. And it gets all mixed up into a complex soup of wanting to get things, wanting to manipulate someone else so we can get things. And then everyone gets playing the game. It gets to be a crazy and chaotic frenzy of wanting and manipulating. You men out there, you need to buy that Just-for-Men hair coloring. Why? Because you want that beautiful younger woman sitting just down the bar from you. And she, we she needs that special shampoo and conditioner that makes her beautiful because she wants you to want her, just like you want her to want you. But, of course, the hair alone isn't going to work. You both need those special Jeans. You, the woman need to get the wrinkles off your face. You need to be as skinny as a rail. Your teeth need to be straight and as white snow. Maybe you need a Victoria's Secret blouse that looks a little seductive. And don't forget about how your breath or your underarms smell. If you want that guy down there to want you, which of course the advertiser tells you that you do, then you're going to need a lot of stuff to make it work.

And, guys, you're list is just as long. You don't have that middle-aged spread, do you? Well, you better get yourself a Bowflex. Did you see how the women in that commercial love those toned, hard, shiny muscles? And don't forget, Valentine's Day is coming. Nothing says you love her like a diamond. Read that, nothing makes her want you more than a diamond, because she's been told that she wants a diamond and that she therefore wants a man who will give her one. And you need some toiletries, just like she does, manly ones, of course. You need the right smelling deodorant and the right smelling cologne. You also need manly hot clothes. If you're at a loss as to which ones to buy, you might want look at the Ralph Lauren ads. Those guys seem to have the right clothes for some good looking women. You might want to look at Tom Brady, too; although after he choked in the Super Bowl, I'm not so sure.

Do you remember the movie "Groundhog Day"? Bill Murray is Phil, a reporter sent to cover Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, PA. Phil finds the assignment trivial, and he has as bad attitude about it. And to his horror, the next day he wakes up it's Groundhog Day all over again. Phil the man, like Punxsutawney Phil the groundhog, finds himself on treadmill going nowhere.

Of course, this rut that Phil is in is a metaphor for his life, which quickly becomes obvious. Phil decides to make the best of things by trying to win the heart of Rita, played by Andie MacDowell. Every day Phil tries to do the things that he thinks that Rita would want a man to do. He tries to do the things that he thinks will make Rita like him. Of course, there's a flaw in Phil's plan. Phil wants Rita. He therefore sets out to make Rita like him. But his whole goal is to possess Rita, so nothing he is doing is authentic. He's acting like he thinks Rita wants him to act, not because he wants to please Rita, that's just a ruse in a sense. He's acting the way he thinks Rita wants him to act so he can get Rita. Do you see the difference?

So, at the end of each day, Phil fails because at one point or another he can't keep up the sham. His egotistical desire to possess Rita ultimately becomes obvious each day. Each day, over and over, Rita comes to see Phil for who he is. She slaps him. The day ends. In the morning it starts all over again. The point we are to get is that even before Groundhog Day started repeating itself, Phil's life was already like Groundhog Day, a day after day repetition of

trying to possess things and people and doing what he thought would essentially trick them into wanting him.

Finally, of course, Phil can't stand it any longer. He falls into despair. His life is a treadmill. Even suicide fails, because he wakes up in the same life the next morning. At a certain point he's just worn out. He has no more energy for manipulation. There's no escape. And he gives up trying. But then something interesting happens. Phil begins to see Rita not as an object of his desire but as a real person, a real person who is very different from him. Rita isn't on a treadmill. She isn't egotistical. She is happy and well adjusted. She is generous. She thinks of others, not herself. With nothing left to lose, Phil begins to try it out. He begins to try to live the way Rita does. In one segment "Phil consecutively: catches a boy falling out of a tree, fixes the flat tire of several elderly women, and performs the Heimlich Maneuver on the town's mayor, saving him from choking on a piece of steak in a restaurant. He has given up spending time with Rita in favor of finding as many people and as many situations as he can in which he can genuinely be of help. His day becomes so increasingly filled with helping the good people of Punxsutawney, PA, that he begins to be treated as a town hero at the evening celebration."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it would not be giving away the ending that you couldn't already guess to tell you that Phil actually changes. And because he changes, Rita's view of him changes. Where manipulation had consistently failed, Phil's transformation succeeds. And more important than winning Rita, Phil gets out of Groundhog Day; he gets off the treadmill. It's worth noting that only when Phil quits trying to manipulate life to get what he wants that life treats him to abundance. This is worth meditating on like a Zen Koan.

Now, in terms of the Garden of Eden, if at the beginning Phil represented the fallen state of humanity, by the end he is restored to a modicum of wholeness. Our Biblical stories this morning give us a similar trajectory.

If the fallenness of humankind is related to the snake tempting us into a into a set of desires that do nothing but make human life a chaotic grasping after things we have been convinced we need but the pursuit of which at best puts on a treadmill and at worst drives us crazy, sends nations to war, and rapes the planet that God has given us, if that is how the snake ruins us, then the failed temptation of Jesus looks very much like a counter-story to the fall. Jesus fasts for forty days before he begins his public ministry. At the end of the time, Satan comes to Jesus and tempts him much like the snake tempted Adam and Eve.

In many religious traditions we find very similar stories. In Buddhism, for example, just prior to his enlightenment the Buddha experienced the most severe temptations that Mara, the rough Buddhist counterpart devil, could muster. Such scenes appear in many religious traditions because the moment and the dynamic are so very basic. The temptations are incredibly powerful. Think again at the success of advertising. The offerings of the crafty ones are compelling and seductive. They look so, well, desirable. Follow them, though, and you find yourself in Groundhog Day.

Jesus was tempted with the best Satan had. Now this means he was really tempted. Jesus wasn't God because he wasn't tempted. He was God because he was tempted and was able to

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the interpretation of the movie follows the insights of Paul Nuechterlein at [http://girardianlectionary.net/year\\_a/lent1a.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/lent1a.htm)

withstand the temptation. And that's very important. This story is not just about how great Jesus was. It's also about how we can follow him off of the treadmill.

Look at what Jesus says to Satan each time that Satan tempts him. Jesus turns to words of scripture. More important, he turns to God. Every time that Satan tries to seduce Jesus with a false desire, Jesus reminds himself of the true desires that God has given him. In that very move Jesus undoes the fall in the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve got tricked into letting Satan dictate their desires. Before that, when their desires came from God, they lived in paradise. Satan tries the same trick with Jesus. Satan tries to feed Jesus with a set of false desires which would have been disastrous. Jesus not only refuses to fall for it, but he also explicitly demonstrates the antidote to the poisonous seduction. The crux seems almost innocent. From whom shall we get our desires? Through whose eyes shall we see what to want? Seeing through the eyes of the snake, through the eyes of the advertisers, through the eyes of most of fallen humankind leads us to grasping and gasping, to desiring to possess things and people in the sad belief that it will make us whole.

Seeing through the eyes of Jesus or God and maybe a few other wondrous examples leads us to desire to be like them. The snake is very crafty. Remember, he told Adam and Eve that they could be like God. But the oil the snake was selling was that they could possess what God possessed. God and Jesus and these few others I am talking about are leading us to desire to act like God, not own God or possess the things God has. They are inspiring us to act with love and compassion, with selflessness and generosity. It's not even about pleasing God, at least not in the sense of much mistaken Christianity. Desiring to please God with believing the right thing, even by doing good works, for the purpose of our own salvation just leads to Groundhog Day. Oh, do you see how crafty the snake is. God wishes to inspire us to act and love like God or Jesus or those few others, not for the purpose of owning, possessing or winning anything. In an irony of ironies, right desire aims itself not at us at all, but one result of it is our own wholeness. In the beginning, Phil in Groundhog day would have loved to have been seen as a hero, especially if it would win him Rita. In the end, he desired to be of help. Then and only then, he became a hero, he got the girl, but most important he got back his human wholeness that he had a long time ago sold to the snake.

This morning God is inviting each of us to get off the treadmill. God is inviting us to wholeness. Amen.