

Genesis 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

SORTING OUT THE VOICES

I want to preface the opening story by stating up front that it is not a logical story at all. In fact, it is a silly story but it makes a very serious point.

The story comes out of the Jewish tradition. There was a rabbi who went on a journey with his servant Jacob. Their cart was drawn by a lively horse of which the rabbi was very fond. When they came to a roadside inn, the rabbi went in to rest, leaving the horse in Jacob's care. A horse trader passed by and made friends with Jacob. He plied Jacob with drink and Jacob became so intoxicated it was easy for the horse trader to induce him to sell him the horse for a small fee. When Jacob sobered up, he was frightened by what he had done. What would the rabbi say? So, Jacob placed himself between the empty shafts of the cart and started to chew hay. When the rabbi came out, he was startled by what he saw, and he said, "What's the meaning of this? Where's the horse?" "That's me!" replied Jacob and then uttered a loud whinny.

"What on earth are you doing, Jacob? Have you gone out of your mind?" "Don't be angry with me, Rabbi," pleaded his servant Jacob. "Years ago a great misfortune happened to me. I was a young man then, a little wild and foolish, and, may God forgive me, I sinned by stealing some money. So to punish me, God turned me into a horse, your horse. For twenty long years you have been my master, Rabbi, little suspecting who I really was. Well, it seems my punishment is over and I'm a man again, praise God!"

When the rabbi heard Jacob's story he began to tremble and pray for God's mercy. However, there was a practical problem to attend to – the rabbi could not continue his journey without a horse, so he went into the market place to buy one. Suddenly, the rabbi stood face to face with his old horse. It was munching some hay at the horse trader's place of business. Going up to it in alarm, the rabbi whispered into the horse's ear, "For goodness sake, Jacob! Again, so soon!"

That silly story makes a very serious point. All of us are tempted and, quite often, we succumb to temptation and we sin. As we consider the temptation story found in Genesis 3, and the resulting "fall" of Adam and Eve, we need to realize that this story is also about us. We too have fallen short of the glory of God.

God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. The man and woman were to work in partnership with God by being good stewards and taking care of the creation. They could eat from every tree of the garden except one – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for if they ate of that tree they would die. Their God-given Paradise was freedom within God-given limits. They could experience much joy and great fulfillment within clearly defined boundaries. Almost everything was there for their enjoyment, and only one thing was "off limits."

I'm reminded of this "freedom within certain limits" almost every time I walk our dog, Toby. I use a lead, which attaches to his halter, and the lead can play out 10-12 feet. Toby has quite a range of movement; he can go in any direction, sniffing here and there. But, once the lead has reached its end, he can't go any farther. This frustrates Toby because he would like to be totally free and go wherever he wanted. But this limited range of motion is for his benefit. It prevents him from going out into the street and being hit by a car. It keeps him close at hand so other larger animals won't come near to attack him. When Toby was lost a couple of years ago, I worried that someone might shoot at him, especially if he bothered their dogs, cats, chickens, or cows. Therefore, whether Toby knows it or not, the lead is a good thing for it gives him some freedom to roam but within well defined limits so as to prevent him from getting lost or hurt.

Likewise, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "out of bounds" for Adam and Eve but it was for their own good. To know both good and evil, at first, sounds like a good thing. It's good to be fully aware of one's surroundings and to have understanding concerning all matters. However, it's more than just the ability to comprehend the ways of the world around them. To eat of this forbidden fruit and to "know" both good and evil was to know everything – to know it not just in some abstract, conceptual way, but to know it intimately and personally by way of experience. If they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the man and woman would delight in the good but they would also encounter (through first-hand experience) pain and suffering. They would experience illness, depression, worry, anger, hopelessness, and even death. Thus, what God had put off limits, God had restricted for the sake of their own well-being. God had warned them away to spare them the terror and the tears.

The serpent is introduced as "more crafty than any other wild animal" and serves as the agent of temptation. Its presence in the Garden indicates that there is an evil force in the world whose bite, like that of the snake, is poisonous and will bring death. The serpent or tempter sought out the woman and spoke to her using speech that was cunning, calculated, and powerfully manipulative. The first time he said, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" and, in doing so, he questioned what God said. The second time, the serpent contradicted what God said: "'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.'"

The woman was tempted and sinned; and her partner, man, went and did likewise. They not only knew about good and evil, they now knew evil and experienced it in all of its many different forms. Their sin was to rebel against God by disobeying God's will and command. The resulting evil led them to be alienated from God as well as from each other as the man tried to place the blame on the woman for "making him eat of the forbidden fruit." Furthermore, they knew guilt and shame; and, whereas before their nakedness was a good design of creation, now they covered themselves with fig leaves, and their innocence was gone. Peace eluded them, and they, in turn, hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God.

Remember that I said earlier that this story is also our story. Adam and Eve's rebellion has taken root within us. Like them, we too are tempted to be like God, to think that we are equals with God. We forget that we are not God; we are God's creatures. We are forever

tempted in this life to think that we are in control, and thus, we strive to do what we want and forsake God's will for our lives. God has given us a great deal of freedom but there are also boundaries to be observed and obeyed. And yet, we pursue that which is forbidden by God, and when we get our way, there are consequences, not the least of which are misery, alienation (from God, others, and our best selves), and death. Then, when we thought we were truly free, we find ourselves held prisoner by the enemies, sin and death.

This story, which is told early on in the Bible, reminds us that we have fallen short of God's glory and of God's expectations for us. By listening to those voices that seduce and tempt us away from God and God's will for our lives, so very often we sin; and, in doing so, we have distanced ourselves from God. We find ourselves in a dark place, a tight, confining space that we got ourselves into, but we can't get out of. We need someone else, a Savior, for we are incapable of saving ourselves.

The Church's season of Lent is a time for us to sort out the various voices that are trying to get our attention, lead us astray, and take us off on a tangent away from God. Lent is a time to listen for the one Voice that loves us the most and wants the very best for us – even by imposing limits of “Thou shalt and thou shalt not” so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Lent is a positive time for honestly and sorrowfully recognizing our sinful disobedience and our need of a Savior.

Jesus' refusal in the wilderness to yield to the devil's temptations and enticements – his refusal to be the Son of God on Satan's terms (or humankind's whims) and to serve the Lord God alone in all love, trust, and obedience – is the beginning of our salvation, which came to fruition by his obedient death on the cross several years later. He is the One – the only One – who has not stepped outside of the relationship of trust in God. He is what the human race might have been. And he is what the human race may yet be. By baptism, we're united with him, who takes us by the hand, and leads us back to God. In our union with him, Christ begins the work of lifting us into a new relationship with God.

In the story of the Fall, while there is punishment for disobedience – the end of Paradise, pangs in childbirth, hard days of toil, and the reality of death (to name just a few) – still, there is the persistent love of God, who refuses to let go of us, even in our sinfulness. After the man and woman had sinned and were naked and ashamed, and hid themselves from God, what did God do? God made them a new set of clothes: “And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.” Likewise, in Jesus Christ, through his perfect obedience, sin and death do not have the last word. God speaks words of mercy, grace, and redemption to us all. And that is the Voice we need to hear, must hear, and follow. That Voice leads us out of the darkness and into the light; that Voice leads us home to God and clothes us in righteousness.

David A. Shirey tells this story on himself. Once as a 7-year-old I threw a tantrum. I told my mom I hated her and that I was leaving home. Before I left, I trashed my room, making as much of a mess as possible. I then stormed down the steps and headed through the kitchen on my way out the back door. My mother asked me on the way out, “How about a jacket?” “A

jacket? Why do I want a jacket?” “Well, if you’re leaving for a while, you’re going to get cold.” “No,” I snapped. “I don’t want a jacket.”

“How about something to eat? You’ll get hungry. And I just made some brownies.” “Well,” I said, “I’ll take a few brownies with me.” And as soon as I got those brownies in hand, I walked out the back door. What I heard as I stepped off the stoop into the back yard were these words from the kitchen: “I love you.” Imagine that. In spite of all I’d done and was still doing, she insisted on clothing me and feeding me and telling me she loved me.

That story sounds a lot like the end of Genesis chapter 3, and the whole rest of the Bible for that matter. God is forever determined to make right again by his grace what has gone wrong by our sin. As I am fond of saying, “God’s ability to forgive and redeem is far greater than our capacity to sin.” Let us truly be sorrowful and repent of our sins, and God will forgive us.

Better yet, let us sort through the many voices until we recognize the Voice that has our best interests at heart. Then, with the help and power of the Holy Spirit, and the prime example of Jesus, who refused to be seduced by the devil and who consistently said “Yes” to God’s will for his life, let us follow his lead by trusting and obeying God.

As we faithfully live under God’s rule, we will rediscover our deepest joy and greatest freedom possible. And then, we will find our way back to Paradise, in to the loving Presence of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - now and forever. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens

First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA

March 13, 2011