



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

I Have a Better Idea

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 3:1-21

May 14, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

It is said that Dr. Karl Barth, an elite theologian of the 20th century, was once asked, “Dr. Barth, do you believe this snake could really talk?” To which Barth replied, “As to whether or not the snake could talk, I have no interest or concern, I am only interested in what the snake said.”¹ As am I.

This is no ordinary story. It is a story of trees that have powers, a snake that talks and a God who loses her children in the garden like a parent loses track of a toddler in a department store. And we learn of Eve—the mother of us all. Not in a genetic sense but in a spiritual sense. She shows up in us all.

Theologians who read these stories as history often refer to this as the story of “the fall.” God created the world good. But anyone who pays attention knows this good world is also broken, as are we all.

So, the theological historians say things were great until Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And once she did that, well, things were irrevocably broken—no going back. We can’t get the toothpaste back in the tube. We all wish Eve hadn’t been hungry that day.

This is an attractive reading, because this way, this is a story about a couple of people a long time ago, but it’s not about us. Once they are caught, they start blaming everyone else. Eve blames the snake. Adam blames both Eve and God, actually. The church has been doing that for generations. It was Eve’s fault. The world fell apart on that Tuesday afternoon when she had to have a snack. It’s “the fall.”

I think reading this story as “the fall,” as a moment in time when the world moved from paradise to sinfulness, is terrible theology. This is not about a moment that happened long ago; this is about every

moment. This is not about the actions of the first persons; this is a story about every person. Which means, like Dr. Barth, we should pay attention to what the woman said and what the man said and what the snake said.

In Dr. Kris Kvam’s book, “Eve and Adam,” she points out that interpreting the serpent as Satan is really a post-biblical interpretation. In the ancient world, serpents were symbols of many things—including life, death, fertility and even wisdom.² The serpent is not described as evil but crafty.

Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”? It’s worth noting that there is nothing in the story to suggest that the woman is surprised that in God’s garden serpents have the gift of speech. She engages the conversation. But the serpent is crafty. As Tom Long has said, “Everything the serpent says is ‘kind of true,’ in the same way many television commercials and product warranties and press releases are ‘kind of true.’”³ God didn’t say: You can’t eat anything. God said: Eat this, don’t eat that. If you do, you will die.

I love how clear the will of God is here. It’s not always that clear, is it? But here, the word of God is clear, “Eat any of this; don’t eat that. If you do, you will die.” The snake says, “You will not die. God has just told you that because if you eat of the forbidden tree, you will be as wise as God. You will know good and evil.”

Knowing good and evil seems like a good idea. Why wouldn’t God want us to know what’s good and what’s evil? We just baptized nine children. Their parents know it’s their responsibility to teach them what is good and what is evil. What’s this about?

1 I do not remember where I have heard this story and am not certain that the details are correct, but I have maintained the point of the story, even if details are confused.

2 Dr. Kris Kvam, *Eve and Adam* (1999) p. 32.

3 Tom Long, *Testimony* (2004) p. 95.

When our kids were small, we lived on a rather busy street corner, so we had to teach them that they couldn't play in the street. That was the rule. You could play in the yard, but you can't play in the street. Play here, don't play there, for if you do, you will die. (I didn't tell them that part, but the truth is, that's what I was worried about). The street was a dangerous place. The rule wasn't arbitrary. It's not like "you can't leave the table without trying the Brussel sprouts" or "you have to finish your homework before playing outside." Those are good rules, but "don't play in the street" is different. It speaks to the reality of the world. The street is a dangerous place.

But rules can be broken and for one of my children—and I'm not going to tell you which one because I wouldn't want to embarrass my son—but one of my children seemed to delight in breaking this rule. This drove me crazy because you can break the rule and play in the street, but what he didn't have the power to do was to make the street a safe place. The rule isn't arbitrary; it defines reality. If I understand the text, Adam and Eve believe they know what's real and true better than God does. This is what I mean.

The serpent says, "God said you will die, but you will not die. No, you will be like God and be wise." And when she 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. "Oh, I know God said that this is a bad tree, but look, it's really good." That's when they eat, but eating wasn't the real sin; it was assuming the creature knows more than the creator.

I think this is the universal human reaction. We seldom do bad things. No, we justify why our actions are good and then we do them. Before she eats, she redefines what is good and what is evil.

God may say this is evil, but she knows better than God. She is saying, "You say children can't play in the street, but I say the ball bounces better here than in the yard. I will determine what is good and what is evil." And the serpent proved right; when we do that, we take the place of God.

But we are often more subtle than that. We don't deny the way of God. We merely justify why it doesn't

apply in the moment or to me like it does to others.

I was in Starbucks and the line was long. I had worked my way near the front, but the guy in front of me was ordering for a family reunion or his high-school class or something. A woman stepped up and said, "I'm sorry but could I step in front of you? The line is so long and I'm on my way to a funeral and I just have to have some coffee. I think it is so rude to be late to a funeral." With that, she stepped in front of me. I said, "Of course." But what I thought was "Really?" I wanted to say, "I'll see you at the funeral. I'll be the one up front."

I was thinking, "She is so rude. I'm glad I'm not rude like that." Oh, I have a bad day sometimes, but that's different. I am under stress sometimes, but that's not the same. I am in a hurry sometimes. I've not been my best self sometimes, but I'm not rude. You hear it? "I don't do evil. Other people are rude, but I have special circumstances."

Why do we do this? Read the Bible from cover to cover and you come face to face with the reality that we are self-centered. That is the biggest struggle for human beings. In a speech given in 2005, David Foster Wallace said, "Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe... We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us... Think about it: There is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of."⁴

Jesus says, "Let me tell you how to live in God's garden: Love your neighbor because your neighbor matters as much as you do." Because your neighbor is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh. I nod at that teaching. I agree with that teaching, but when push comes to shove, I assume I am more important than my neighbor. Now I don't want to say that out loud, so I construct my reasons. I am more important because I am not a rude person. I am more responsible. I'm better educated. I am an American. I am a Presbyterian. You hear what I am doing. I am saying: I know what God says, but that fruit is good for food, a delight to the eyes and will make me wise. I hear you God, but I have a better idea. I will create my own rules for good

4 David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015) p. 10.

and evil. And they will always benefit me.

But that's not all. Adam is here, too. He remains silent, but he, too, redefines what is good. And when God confronts Adam with the truth—a truth he cannot deny—he does what you would expect a grown man to do: He blames someone else.

“It's not my fault.” “That's a whole other sermon and we don't have time to explore that.” “But suffice it to say...”

To thrive in God's world, in God's garden, we need to remember the promise of our baptism, which is: I am a child of God, but I am not God. I can pretend

that I determine what is good and what is evil; I can pretend that I define what is ultimately right and what is ultimately wrong; I can pretend, but I can't make it so. Because God has determined what is real and true and good.

And deep down I know it. No matter how much I try to tell myself otherwise, deep down, way down where God's word whispers with honesty in my soul, I know. We all know what God has said is good. We may not know the will of God clearly in every circumstance, but we know enough. The question is will we trust it.