

How Does Our Garden Grow?

Genesis 3

The story, from the book of Genesis, taking place in the Garden of Eden -- Adam and Eve eat fruit from the one tree of which God said, "Don't eat it!" It was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. You remember that they ate the forbidden fruit and were ejected from paradise to live life in pain, struggle, and conflict, and then die.

The question before us is this: "why did God put the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden if Adam and Eve weren't supposed to eat it?" In other words, why would God punish us for exercising our free choice?" It's a fair question. To answer it fairly, we need some background help in order to read this story more clearly. We need to identify the deeper questions that underlie this question. Then, we need to step away from this particular story and answer the question in the context of our lives of pain, struggles, and conflict today.

This is first in my summer sermon series called "Ask Jack." The congregation's questions become my content. Why are your questions so important? Because they're your questions, part of your journey to know and understand life more clearly from the perspective of faith. When you're able to articulate your deepest questions and grapple with the answers, the process will strengthen your ability to work out what you think and believe -- what you will do with your life. When you share your questions, it gives me the opportunity to help you clarify them, cope with your struggles, clarify your values, make choices, live into the answers, and decide what is meaningful for your spiritual journey. The result of sharing and grappling with questions is that each of us discovers who we are more deeply and where we are going more clearly.

Now to the Garden of Eden and that familiar, if rather strange, story of creation, sin, and the consequences of eating the wrong fruit. The Old Testament is the story of the Jewish people's journey of faith and identity. In some sense, the story begins with Abraham leaving home (Genesis 12). Following Abraham, you've got Isaac and Jacob whose name was changed to Israel. Jacob was the father of Joseph who was the cause of the children of Israel going to Egypt.

Their story really begins, however, with the Exodus from Egypt and their encounter with God on Mt. Sinai where they received the Law. From there, they were on a journey to become a nation centered in Jerusalem, particularly in the temple built by King Solomon. In other words, the book of Genesis is all really background to the Exodus story.

All the Genesis stories before Abraham serve as background to what follows. They reflect the efforts of early human beings to sort out how life came to be. They are the mythic understandings of why people struggle, and why there is pain and conflict. The stories had their origins in stories told around fires at night by various tribes and races. Eventually, these groups came to comprise the Hebrew. The stories were passed along, consolidated, and finally written down.

Genesis is a compilation of at least three different sources. The stories were not put together until much later. They do not always agree with each other concerning what happened, why it happened, and the nature of God. Genesis is not a seamless description of God and creation, but

an ongoing conversation – an honest attempt by people of faith seeking how and why, and to find meaning using the language of their own culture.

To find the meaning that is available for us in this ancient story, we have to remember that it was told from the perspective of a more modern people who were looking back trying to make sense of life as they knew it. It is an archetypal story of good and evil, of longing for a lost time of paradise and intimacy with a loving God, and of hope for a corresponding future paradise with God. It was told within the context of life that felt cut off from that paradise and intimacy. It represents an attempt to see humanity's current state of pain, struggle, and conflict as still within the will of God.

It is convenient to blame the satanic serpent for deceiving the woman, to blame the seductive woman for enticing the brainless man, and to seeing him as a hapless victim. It is very human to blame what we don't understand on actions of a righteous and judging God. This is essentially what the prophets of Israel at the time of the Babylonian exile (6th & 5th centuries BCE). They were able to frame the exile as God's punishment for Israel's faithlessness rather than what would have been the common understanding that Babylon's gods had defeated Israel's God.

People generally may not like the idea of a God who is punitive and violent, but they are more afraid of a God who is not in charge. Better a wrathful God than a weak one. In our own perspective, it seems we would rather have an oppressive government than a society of anarchy. The biblical narrative eventually moved toward an understanding of God who is neither angry nor weak – toward a new concept of divinity. A common thread in the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, is of a God who wants to be in relationship with people. It moves toward an image of God who is much more cosmic and spiritual and less person-like and theistic – less a being who walks with us among the trees and more being itself in whom we live, move, and have our being.

So, back to the original question: “why did God put the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden in the first place” if Adam and Eve were not supposed to eat it? Was it just to be mean? Was it to tempt and test the couple and test their self-discipline? None of this seems like something a loving parent would do, much less a loving God!

There are some other questions I have about this story. What is wrong with learning about good and evil? Why was it so awful to eat this fruit – so awful that it would bring a penalty of expulsion and death? Does God not want us to exercise our own judgment and learn about good and evil? Is it not within God's will for us to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and look at the world without blinders?

Why would God punish people for exercising our own free choice? The only answer that makes sense to me is that leaving Eden was not a punishment! It was a consequence, but not a punishment. Perhaps it was, in some ways, even a good thing.

What if the consequences of knowing good and evil were that Adam and Eve could not stay in the Garden of Eden? What if the action of eating the fruit indicated the couple were growing up – becoming adults – and adults just couldn't stay in *Neverland*, the idyllic garden? What if being

adult means recognizing that you are a sexual being and accepting your sexuality – learning to accept and love yourself and others and to be responsible and faithful in your relationships?

Being an adult means earning a living by the sweat of your of brow. Being an adult means giving birth, bringing forth new life even through the pain of childbirth! It also means bringing forth newness of life through our struggles, pain, conflicts, confusion, grief, and betrayal. We all live East of Eden – where we shape our lives and choose the attitudes that we carry with us through life.

The story of Adam and Eve, the snake, the fruit, and ejection from paradise reflects people's need to place the context of their far-from-idyllic lives within the will of God, even if that that will seems cruel and full of judgment for humanity's failure. The Bible offers other images of God as well, a God who fervently desires us to eat and drink deeply of knowledge and wisdom, and have our eyes opened. But make no mistake, the cost of wisdom is great. It requires so much! We have to look at ourselves clearly, come to grips with who we are, and suffer the consequences of our free choices.

The payoff, and there is definitely a payoff, is that we discover -- slowly at first, but then more clearly and with an urgency of joy -- that the God who walked in Eden in the cool of the day is the same Spirit in whom we live every day, every step of our way. Something even better than Eden's paradise, full partnership and an even deeper intimacy with God, is available to us here and now. The pain, struggles, and conflicts of life, far from curse or punishment, are gifts that enable us to grow in wisdom and stature. In the economy of heaven, they become our treasure. Jesus told his disciples, all of them and all of us, to take up our cross and follow. This is the way to life that is eternal and abundant. This is life in all its fullness that God is re-creating in each of us and in, and in all of us, this new day in Jesus' name.