

**March 5, 2017**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7 / Matthew 4:1-11**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

Once upon a time, there was a mysterious, miraculous, and marvelous new world – filled with all manner of odd and fascinating creatures – wing-ed ones, water living ones, four legged land rovers and runners. The days were filled with the cacophony of an endless symphony of tweets and bleats, squeaks, squawks, and chirps. The varieties of howls, meows, woofs, grunts, and roars were beyond counting! Except when darkness settled in and all slept peacefully. Then there descended a blissful blanket of peace and silence, and the stars and constellations overhead took center stage. And if you can believe it, there was even more to this new world. There was thick and lush vegetation, as far as the eye could see. It was a feast for the senses. This place was splashed with a riot of colors, scents, shapes, sizes and textures. Tall and leafy, small, spindly, succulent. Hardy and delicate, thorny and smooth. And the tastes were beyond exquisite. Sweet, tart, crunchy, juicy. Who could ever dream up so many different flavors and textures to tingle and tantalize the taste buds?

Isn't a garden one of the most enchanting places you could ever want to visit? A garden of absolute pleasure this was – an utterly sensual smorgasboard of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Who wouldn't want to stay here forever?

The man and woman had been placed here by the Holy Creator, Lover, and Sustainer and given rich gifts: the very gift of life itself, abundantly displayed all around them. The companionship of one another and all those creatures. Meaningful work to do keeping the garden tended. The freedom to walk about anywhere they pleased. Only one thing was off limits. A single tree. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were not permitted to eat from that tree.

Now there was in this vibrant place pulsing with incredibly dynamic life, one especially mesmerizing, clever and attractive creature, more clever than any other wild thing God the Creator had made. A talking serpent. And this talking serpent was sooo very bright. After all, it posed the very first question in the Bible, which led to the first recorded conversation in the Bible, and it was a theological discussion at that. Not a conversation with God or to God, mind you. But a conversation about God.

“Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?” said the serpent to the woman. The woman said, “Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the

garden. It's only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, "Don't eat from it; don't even touch it or you'll die."

The serpent told the woman, "You won't die. God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil."

When the woman saw that the tree looked like good eating and realized what she would get out of it – she'd know everything – she took and ate the fruit and then gave some to the man who had been there all along, too, quietly listening apparently, letting her do all the talking. He ate some of the fruit as well.

Immediately the two of them did "see what's really going on" – saw themselves naked! They sewed fig leaves together as makeshift clothes for themselves". (*excerpted from "The Message"*).

Paradise received as a graced gift. . . is lost with the simple choice to pluck something that looked so luscious and appealing, the woman just knew it would be the sweetest of anything she'd ever tasted. All this set in motion with one simple question. "Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?"

With that question, the serpent misquotes and misrepresents God, exaggerating the life-giving boundary God had set around that one tree. The serpent's question sows a seed of doubt, a moment of distrust for the woman. And she begins to exaggerate herself, adding that God told them not even to touch the tree, which God had not said. The serpent's question shifts the conversation so that it is no longer about making the garden a safe place for them to live. The boundary is now a threat. God's rule is seen as something to be gotten around. Something in them, in us, cannot abide being told "this far, and no further."

Fascinating isn't it, this unexpected twist in the story. It is just a glimmer of doubt and distrust the woman entertains briefly. But God's good intentions have been brought into question, as well as God's power, authority, and supreme "otherness". It seems like this glimmer of distrust is enough to set a rivalry in motion. A limit imposed is now a limit to be challenged.

Apparently what the woman and man had been given was somehow not enough. The companionship of each other and the created world, meaningful work to do, and the companionship of their Creator must not have been fulfilling. As long as there was freedom to choose, there would always be potential for them to have more, to be more. One bite of that perfectly satisfying fruit - and more knowledge too! Who doesn't want

more knowledge? Because the sky is the limit when it comes to knowledge, right? Why would there need to be any limits set around knowledge and how it's used? And why not be equal to God – powerful and praiseworthy. What's wrong with wanting to be all that we can be, especially if it means we can become like gods?

Well, you know there is a bit of a problem here. God created the world, so God gets to set the rules about how life is lived in that world. God determines there will be mutually satisfying companionship – no one will be left alone. There will be life-giving work for everyone to do. And there will be boundaries put in place, born of God's wisdom and choosing. God will understand the reasons, but human beings might not understand. There are some things human beings cannot, and do not need to know.

The woman and man have their hands full, don't you think - just trying to figure out how best to use the freedom God gave them. And now they have decided to take the world into their own hands. So their interest shifts from tending the garden and attending to the relationship with their Creator, to focusing on themselves and their new freedom, and the terror that comes with it. No longer innocent, the woman and man learn there will always be consequences for their choices, consequences which they would have to learn to live with.

There have been so many interpretations of this story over thousands of years. There is no mention of sin, "original" sin, or a "fall" in this story. There is no explanation offered for why evil exists in the world. But from time immemorial humans have looked for answers to those questions. Yet it is noteworthy that no one physically dies as a result of their eating forbidden fruit in the story. At the very least, the human's relationship with God and each other now will be different from where those relationships began at the moment of creation. Pain and hurt, loss and disillusionment, broken trust and alienated relationships are real, part of the fabric of human life.

Well what is a Creator God to do with such a turn of events? Like that friendly voice on your GPS saying, "Recalculating", God now goes into creative "recalculating" mode since the humans have abused their freedom. And what does God do? God protects the woman and man by making clothes for them and then banishing them from the garden. It comes as no surprise that they must leave the garden. The miracle is that the woman and man don't die, but continue to live! This God is always about bringing life through whatever brokenness and muck we might create or find ourselves in.

Like all stories in the Bible, this story of beginnings is about God. A God who puts humans in a beautiful place, with a role and life-giving work to do. A God who provides expectations, along with abundance. We, too, have experienced God's abundant

provision and holy expectations. And as was true for Eve and Adam, for us there will be other voices, attractive voices that draw our attention to things that have the power to seduce us but not to bring life, and bring it more abundantly, as God does.

It is so easy to listen and give ourselves over to those voices in moments of doubt and discontent and distrust, rather than turning toward the voice of the holy living God. The voice of a God who is still speaking, still wooing, still waiting for us to ask for the help we need to desire God and God's ways above all else. The truth is we have been created with a God-shaped hole inside us that absolutely nothing else but God can satisfy.

As together we walk these forty days of Lent, we will continue to learn, and live, and lean into the deep mystery of God's love and God's desire for healing and wholeness, for each of us, and life for all of humanity. It does not matter that this is a route that has required many "recalculations" by God. I bid you to walk gently and with your heart wide open, listening intently for the voice of the Holy One who calls each of us beloved and has work for us to do.

Take time daily to consider the blessings and challenges, and the promises gently showered upon us by the One who holds us close. This is the Holy One who is forever calling us to renewed life, and deeper, more mature lives of trust, of care, of grateful obedience and the courageous seeking after holy wisdom. Let us then, friends, take up this transforming journey once again. With God, always we begin again.