

Sometimes A Snake Is Just A Snake

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

^{2:15}The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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.”

^{3:1}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?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but 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.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶So 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. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

When you look at something long enough, you can begin to think that’s the only way there is to see it.

Take the earth for example. The ground beneath our feet. Now I know you’ve all seen pictures of the earth from space, and you were taught in school that earth is spinning around out there in space going a gazillion miles per hour. But just for the moment, try to forget all that. Try to imagine you live in the 16th and 17th centuries and all you had to go on were your senses. Now, could there be anything more obvious except to say the ground beneath us isn’t moving? I mean come on- if the earth were moving, if it were spinning around like a ball; everything would be in chaos. Things would be flying off. Buildings would collapse. The seas would be in chaos. We saw this tragically in Japan last Friday- we know what happens when the earth moves on us.

So, if you just go by what your senses tell you, you'd know without a doubt that the earth is as still and solid as it gets.

And there's more. What do we say the sun does every morning? (It rises.) Yes! That's it- the sun RISES. And in the evening? It sets. Yes! We are not the ones moving- you would feel it. No, it's the sun that is traveling around us. The sun is the one rising and setting. Same way with the moon and the stars. They are the ones dancing around us- not the other way around.

And there's more, if you lived in the 16th or 17th century you wouldn't just have your senses that tell you this- but you'd have the smartest person who ever lived on your side, too. You'd have Aristotle. Aristotle lived during the golden age of Greek philosophy. He was Plato's student and tutored Alexander the Great. He was an absolute genius. For a couple of thousand years Aristotle was the man when it came to just about everything. Want to know about poetry? Aristotle. Want to know about the physical world? Aristotle. Want to know how to get Red Kool Aide out of your white sofa? Aristotle. I mean he doesn't have the answer to that- but you'd ask him.

And to any thinking person Aristotle proved once and for all that the earth was flat and fixed. He said imagine a tower as big as you can. Now send a minion up there with a huge rock- maybe send a couple of minions. Now, when you're at the top of the tower, have them look down just to make sure no one you like is under them, and then tell them to drop the rock. Now, Aristotle says, look what happens- the boulder drops straight to the bottom on a straight line from where it fell. It just falls straight down. Now, if the earth were moving, if it were some kind of round ball revolving around the sun- when you dropped the rock from the tower it

wouldn't fall straight down. No. Depending on which direction the earth was moving- the rock would fall either towards or away the tower, or from to one side or the other. And since this clearly isn't the case, then voila- flat, fixed earth.

Now no one, not even Nicholas Copernicus, this crazy Polish priest who first suggested that the earth was really traveling around the sun, had a good answer for this. So, if you were just a regular person going about your business in the late middle ages, not only did the earth feel fixed and firm, but you have brilliant people like Aristotle agreeing with you, too. And honestly, after awhile, when you seen something in one way for a long, long time- you just begin to think that's just how it is.



Well, this is how it is with the story in Genesis this morning. Few passages have been seen as important in the life of the church, or, on the surface, more obvious in terms of its meaning. For nearly two thousand years the church has read this story in one way- we've read this story and said that what was happening was a fall. Since the time of Augustine theologians in the church have all read this passage saying that what's going on here is Adam and Eve are falling down in a terrible, terrible way.

Here's how the story goes. Once upon a time God created the heavens and the earth and all the creatures and at the very end, like the cherry on top, God created humanity in God's own image. Then, you say, well what happened after that? And they say- ah ha! We can tell you. The first two people were Adam and Eve, and God set them up in this incredible garden, this place called Eden. And Adam was running around slapping name tags on everything, the platypus and the warthog were arguing for a do-over, and Eve was running around in her

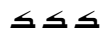
gardening boots and nothing else, being VERY careful with the pruning shears. And life was as perfect as it gets. They were living in perfect harmony with God and the world and each other. It was bliss.

But then! And this is where the soundtrack turns really, really dark, then, the snake enters into the picture. Satan enters into the picture. Yeah, Eve is going along, minding her own business, when the snake begins to hiss in her ear. “So,” snake says. “Did God really say you couldn’t eat from any of the trees in the garden?” (Knowing FULL well God never said ANY such thing.) “Oh gosh no,” said Eve, defending God. “God said we could eat from all of the trees- just not the one in the center. If we eat that one, he said we’ll die.” And the snake then draws itself up a little and shakes his venomous head at her, “Oh no, no, no. You won’t die. That’s the true of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. You won’t die if you eat from it. But your eyes will be open and you’ll know good from evil just like God, and he doesn’t want that. THAT’S why he doesn’t want you poking around it. Now, you do whatever you want, but if I were you, the fruit on that tree sure looks tasty.” And then off that devilish serpent slinks, his trap set, and the damage done.

And you all know what happens next. Eve takes a bite of the apple, and then she offers it to Adam. And of course men and women have argued for centuries over which was worse- Eve to offer the apple, or Adam who would just eat anything set before him apparently. But whoever you think is to blame, the church has always pinpointed the problems in the world to this moment- what Augustine called this original sin. For Adam and Eve do become like God knowing good and evil, and they begin to cover their bodies creating a boundary between

themselves, and they wind up kicked out of the garden, and they have to find work, and they become mortal, and they learn what it is to suffer joy and sorrow.

For a long time the church has just thought of this as a terrible fall from grace. God created humanity good. And then they fell. And then, almost like an infomercial, after showing you how bad things are, theologians then leap in saying, “But wait!” and offer the product that will fix everything, which is Jesus. But the starting point is this fall. And the church has read this story about Adam and Eve as a fall for so long- after a while it’s like there’s no other way of reading it.



What makes life fun, what makes it interesting is that now and then a person comes by who sees things in a different way and has the poor manners to actually say such things out loud.

Galileo Galilei was one of those kinds of people. Today Galileo is famous for all sorts of things- he made major improvements to the telescope and with it he saw for the first time moons around Jupiter, he discovered sunspots, he even built a better compass. But what really made Galileo extraordinary, a genius really, wasn’t so much his ability to develop new inventions and see things no one had ever seen before. But made him a genius was his ability to look at the same facts everyone else had been seeing in one way for such a long time- but to interpret them in an entirely new way.

In 1610 Galileo made a fairly bad career move- he started to publically support Copernicus and his crazy view that the earth isn’t stable and unmoving as it appears, but that the earth itself is actually in motion and spinning around like a giant top. This was a bad move for a

couple of reasons- the scientific community started treating him like a punch line, for one thing. And worse, the church, which ran the world back then, didn't view people like Galileo so much as funny, but as a threat. You may recall from your vague memory of a history class from a ways back that in 1610 the Inquisition was very much in force, and it wasn't limited to Spain. But there's no talking to people like Galileo- bad idea or not, he persisted.

But his enormous challenge, a challenge that had thwarted everyone for a thousand years was Aristotle and that dog gone tower of his. Ever the scientist Galileo decided to test the hypothesis, and he famously tossed cannon balls off the leaning tower of Pisa, hoping that with new, more sensitive instruments he might detect some movement. But of course his experiment simply confirmed what everyone else already knew- when you drop a cannon ball off the top of a tall tower, it just falls straight down. The earth isn't moving under it- the ball doesn't fall closer or farther away from the tower. Just straight down. Use whatever sensitive instrument to measure it you like.

But far from being discouraged, Galileo couldn't stop thinking about this. And as legend has it he was thinking about this problem one day as he was riding on a wagon absentmindedly tossing an apple up and down in his hand. (Why is it always apples with physicists?) And all of a sudden he realized that even though he knew the apple was moving, the wagon was going at a pretty good clip, the apple just seemed to just fly up and down in a straight line in his hand as he tossed it. It wasn't moving away from him. It was just going up and down. But that wasn't right. According to Aristotle it should be falling away. And then it hit him- why hadn't he seen it before? The apple appeared to move straight up and down as he tossed it, because he and the apple were BOTH moving. They were both moving.

And just like that he saw what no one else had. It was the same with Aristotle's tower. Of course a ball dropped from a tower would fall straight down- that didn't prove the earth wasn't moving. It was just as possible that the earth and the ball were moving, and because they were moving at the same speed the ball appeared to drop straight down. Galileo saw the same set of facts, the same story, if you will, as everyone else had for hundreds of years- but he read them differently, he interpreted them in a different way. And it changed the world.



And it turns out the same is true for this story in Genesis, too. It turns out that not everyone in the church has read this story as being about a fall. In fact one guy, a guy named Irenaeus, thought the story was more about growing up than it is about falling down.

Irenaeus of Lyon was born in Turkey in the year 135. He became a leader in the church early in his life, and wound up serving in what was the wild west at the time, Lyon, France. Irenaeus had pretty good timing. In 177 he was at some church conference in Rome when everything in Lyon went sideways and there was a huge persecution. The mob even killed Pothinus the Bishop. And when Irenaeus came back things had calmed down, the church "rewarded" Irenaeus for his absence by electing him to be the new bishop in Pothinus' place. I'm sure he was looking at his bishop's robe thinking that cross looked suspiciously like a target.



Now, maybe it was that tough environment. Or maybe it had to do with being Turkish and living in France, but Irenaeus was not the cuddliest of guys. His most important book was titled: Against the Heresies. And it's as fun as it sounds. And if you ever wondered who it was

who way back in the day decided the church had to draw lines and figure out who was in and who was out- well Irenaeus is kind of the poster child for that kind of thinking.

And yet. The way he reads this story? It's fascinating. For Irenaeus the story of Adam and Eve isn't a tragedy. It's a coming of age story. Irenaeus points out that in the Hebrew, Adam and Eve are just described as human- it doesn't say they're adults. And seizing on this, Irenaeus says the only way to really make sense of this story is to understand that Adam and Eve weren't grown ups- they were children, toddlers even.

He said it's the only way to make sense of the story when you think about it. Adam and Eve run around completely naked and not even aware of it. Only children are like that. Nearly every kid goes through a phase where you can't keep clothes on them, and just try explaining to them why it isn't OK to run around the lawn in their birthday suit. Good luck.

And it's why they don't know the difference between good and evil. They're children. Their kids. They are before what we call the age of reason. Good and evil- it's not quite formed in their minds yet.

And God is immediate for them. They live in this kind of perfect relationship- God never feels absent to them. God is as real as the green grass beneath their feet. For the most part only children know a faith like this.

Adam and Eve aren't adults, Irenaeus says. They are children. And taking that fruit- it wasn't the act of a rebel. It was the act of a child pushing their boundaries, touching the stove, as it were, and then growing up.

And it's not just Adam and Eve- when you look at the story a little differently you start to notice all sorts of things. Take the snake. The snake is probably the most fascinating part. Augustine said the snake was none other than the devil- the snake was Satan himself. Now, I'm not a huge fan of snakes- but when you actually read the story, where does it say that the snake is the devil- or even that the snake is bad? Our translation says the snake is crafty- but shrewd is just as accurate a translation. If we are to be as literal as possible- the snake isn't the devil. The snake is just a snake.

He's even kind of helpful, isn't he? The snake was right about that tree. When the two ate of that fruit- they didn't die like they thought. It wasn't poisoned. And their eyes were opened. They saw themselves in an entirely new way- they saw the world in an entirely new way. They became self-aware. They cover their bodies. And of course the result of this is they no longer get to live in Eden any longer. With their eyes are open, it's time for them to learn how to live in the real world. They have to learn how to work. They begin to suffer pain. And they have to grapple with the reality that they won't live forever- that there will be a day when each of them are not.

And to Irenaeus, this, this isn't a story about a fall as much as it is a story about growing up. There is no cosmic, original sin that somehow condemns the mortal soul of everyone in the world unless you buy into some creed someone somewhere made up. No, the story is better than that. Harder really. It's about starting to live your life with your eyes open. To accept that sometimes you feel God's presence with you- and sometimes God's face feels very hidden indeed. It means knowing that pain and suffering- well these are just as much a part of life as our joy. It means knowing, especially during this season of Lent as we make our way towards

the cross, that our days are numbered- and none of us know exactly what's on the other side. And this isn't tragic- this isn't a fall. This is what being a grown up means. And the real question Adam and Eve pose to us is whether we're willing to accept this and make our homes East of Eden and face the mystery and live like grown ups, or whether we keep looking, scrounging for ways to fall back into the garden where we can act like children and always look to someone else to do our thinking for us.

Just as certain as the church is that this story is about a fall- that's how certain we were that Galileo was dead wrong about the earth. In 2000, 400 years later, the church issued an apology to Galileo...saying he might have been onto something with that moving earth idea of his. Unfortunately, Galileo couldn't be reached for comment. But it leaves me wondering what else, what else might we be wrong about? **Amen.**