

## **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

<sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>but 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.”

<sup>3</sup>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?’” <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>but 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.’” <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

<sup>6</sup>So 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. <sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

## **Matthew 4:1-11**

<sup>4</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup>But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” <sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” <sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## **A HAPPY ENDING**

What’s your favorite Shakespeare play? Mine is *Macbeth*. I usually prefer comedies to tragedies, and Shakespeare’s comedies are entertaining, but I think that Shakespeare really has a knack for demonstrating human weakness as so well illustrated in his tragedies. I thought about *Macbeth* as I was preparing this sermon, and I think it’s safe for me to tell you the plot without fear of spoiling it for any of you (face it; if you haven’t read it or seen it or read it by now, what are the chances that you ever will?). Act 1, Scene 3 of *Macbeth*, three witches foretell Macbeth’s future as king of Scotland, despite the fact that there already is a king of Scotland named Duncan who is a fine fellow and has his own heirs. Macbeth is also a fine fellow when we first meet him; he’s a national hero, honored by the king and his countrymen. But something changes after this meeting with the witches.

As I mentioned, Shakespeare has a keen sense of human vulnerability, and what’s interesting in *Macbeth* is the fact that the supernatural has little to do with a person’s downfall. Macbeth has a few conversations with some witches, but the witches don’t do anything supernatural that leads to Macbeth’s demise. They don’t cast any spell on him. They don’t turn him into a villain. All they do is put a bug in his ear. They tell him that he shall be king hereafter – Macbeth’s own mind (and a little prompting from his wife) gets the tragedy ball rolling.

The same thing happens in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (you don't suppose God stole this plot from Shakespeare, do you?). The serpent simply puts a bug in Eve's ear – *"If you nibble from that fruit over there, guess what? You'll be like God.* Just a simple suggestion leads the man and woman to take one tragic step that leads to their demise. The Hebrew word for serpent – שָׂרָפ (pronounced nä-khäsh') is rooted in the Hebrew word שָׂרַף (pronounced nä-khash') which happens to mean *divination, fortunetelling*, precisely what the serpent does in Eden and what the witches do on the heath near Forres. The witches tell Macbeth, "You will be king hereafter!" The serpent tells the humans, "You will be like God."

What does that mean, to be like God? The Old Testament passage indicates that it means, in part at least, *knowing good and evil*. And it's certainly true that Adam and Eve *did* know what evil is the moment they decided to taste the forbidden fruit. They knew that what they had done was evil, and their first acts upon knowing this were to recognize that they were naked and to clothe themselves. What's the connection between knowing good and evil and recognizing you're naked? Is it evil for us to wear clothes? I like Pastor David Lose's explanation: In desiring to be more like God, Adam and Eve lost a sense of their own true identity and consequently they lost their own sense of security.<sup>1</sup> Our identity is nearly impossible to define apart from relationships. When you say you're a son or daughter, you define yourself *in relation to* your parents. When you say you're a mother or a father, you define yourself *in relation to* your children. To be teacher you have to have students. The only people who live without human relationships are those who have chosen to live in isolation from society, who plant their own food and make their own clothes from scratch. Yet even they have a relationship with the earth as long as they eat and breathe. Adam and Eve had a relationship with God – they were his *creation, his children* if you will, and that relationship was built on love and trust. Later in the Old Testament God will explain that relationship saying, "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exodus 19:5). God is saying, "Your obedience and trust make you special to me. Keep it up and our *relationship* will flourish." Macbeth had a relationship with his king, Duncan; Duncan loved and trusted Macbeth, a great war hero, highly exalted by all. And just as Macbeth chose to end his relationship with Duncan by killing him in order to make himself the king, Adam and Eve chose to break off that relationship with God in order that they could be *like* God.

That is what sin does; it severs our relationship with God. Just as bad, sin severs our relationship with one another. And the severance of a relationship with God and with one another is, at its root, the result of a loss of identity within ourselves. Adam and Eve covered their nakedness not only because they felt vulnerable in front of God; they felt vulnerable in front of each other. They were now afraid, and we see that their fear soon caused them to lash out at others – Adam lashing out at Eve (*"she made me do it!"*) and Eve lashing out at the serpent (*"He made me do it!"*). That same fear consumes Macbeth and his wife as the murder of the king causes both of them to go mad, her to the point of suicide and him to the point of repeated homicide as he starts purging his advisors until he is all alone with no one to defend him against Malcolm's soldiers. Sin pits us against one another in a race to the bottom, all the time leading us into more and more isolation as we inevitably run into conflict with others who are just as determined as we are to *be like God*.

Enter Jesus, stage right, and Satan, stage left. The scene in our Gospel reading is out in the wilderness where Jesus has been fasting for forty days. Satan has to use different tactics with Jesus, but he plays on the relationship theme, acknowledging what the Father has already confirmed and what Jesus knows: he is the Son of God. I should mention that the Greek word εἰ (pronounced like "eye") which our Bible translates *if* might be better translated *since*. "Since you are the Son of God..." Satan is not so much questioning Jesus' identity, but rather trying to subvert the relationship that he has with God. "Since you

are the Son of God, you should do this..." There were different ways people understood what it meant to be "Son of God." It was used in the Old Testament to mean someone of King David's lineage (see 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 28:6; Psalm 2:7). It was also used to mean supernatural, angelic beings (Genesis 6:2; Psalm 82:7). Among the Romans it meant Caesar, the emperor, *which goes to show you just how much humanity had perverted that title by the time Jesus takes the world stage. We had transformed the phrase "Son of God" into a title that justified our lust for wealth and power in this world.* That's not what it meant to Jesus. To him, the designation "Son of God" does not entitle him to any special consideration over and above other people. Jesus takes it to mean exactly what God intended it to mean, that God was his father whom he should love, trust, and obey, and the relationship should neither be tested nor manipulated. Jesus shows ultimate faith in God, because he refuses to make God "prove" his love by doing anything special for him. Jesus will wait for his food like anyone else. He will not put God to the test, and he will trust that God's provision will be enough for him. Furthermore, the designation "Son of God" should not be used as a title that gives its bearer some privilege over other people; we are all, in fact, children of God.

Comprehending that our relationship with God as his children is a relationship based on love, trust, and obedience paves the way for healthy relationships with one another. We place our trust in God to give us all "our daily bread," and because we trust in God we can in faith provide for others. Our problem is that we get enticed by the material riches of this world to the point where we think we need them and we doubt that God can provide them. In our futile pursuit of the best, the newest, the most fashionable, the most entertaining *things*, in our frenzy to acquire and accumulate, we turn a blind eye to the legitimate needs of others. We deprive others of life itself. We *clothe* ourselves in riches thinking that they will protect us, even from the presence of God, only to learn (eventually) that they can do us no good as we must all stand before him when he calls us. Macbeth finally concludes that life "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." This is the tragedy that befalls him even before he is killed. Macbeth has died *spiritually* before he dies physically. And it all started with the simple thought that he could be king.

We live in a culture that broadcasts that we can have "the good life," that we deserve it, and all we have to do is reach out and take it. That belief has so polluted our thoughts that the "prosperity gospel" perhaps attracts more disciples than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Satan knows our weakness, just as the serpent knew Eve's and the witches knew Macbeth's. Who's been tempting you? What voices do you hear telling you what you could or should have? Who has been trying to persuade you that you don't need God, that you yourself can fill that role? And how well are you resisting such temptation?

During this season of Lent, we traditionally fast, and fasting does not simply mean giving up food; it can mean giving up just about anything, it means intentionally doing the opposite of Adam and Eve and Macbeth – doing without the thing that entices us and instead affirming our true identity as children of God. Notice in each of Jesus' responses to Satan, God is mentioned; Jesus will not live by bread but by the word of God, Jesus will not put God to a test, and Jesus will worship and serve only God. God, God, God! Lent is a time to strengthen ourselves against the onslaught of Satan by affirming our status as children of God. And Jesus not only instructs us on how to resist temptation; he shows us the reason we resist temptation by showing us the nature of the God we are to worship and serve, the one who never abandons us to depravity, who comes to our aid when we are in danger, who provides us with more than we need, who withholds nothing, not even his own Son, to save those that he loves so much. The key to making your fast – whatever you give up for Lent – successful is by focusing on the relationship you have with the one true God, by remembering who you are, and whose you are. May God remind

you of his steadfast love and your special status as children of God so that you may gain the strength to resist all temptation. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>“Identity Theft” by David Lose, found online at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3088>