

Antiheroes Sermon Series: Eve
Genesis 2:25 – 3:13, 20-21
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It's hard not to like Eve. She's bright and articulate, a good theologian, and not afraid to face serpents single handedly. What's not to like about *that*? She tests out what's been handed over to her, refusing to accept without question whatever is thrown her way. When she's caught red handed, she doesn't waste a lot of words coming up with defensive excuses. "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." Short and to the point. She owns her mistakes.

But early in the life of the church, Eve was given a more sinister reputation. The Greek Apocalypse of Moses, a Greek Jewish text that didn't make it in the Bible, has Eve confessing to her descendants that the Fall came about as the result of a sexual relationship between her and the tempter. Somehow the devil gets introduced into the story even though there is no devil in the Genesis account. Rather than knowingly eating the fruit as Adam does in the Genesis account, in this one he's tricked and exclaims, "O evil woman! Why have you wrought evil among us?"¹

1 Timothy, a text that *did* make it into the Bible makes a similar argument. "Adam was not deceived," some follower of Paul writing in his name argues, "but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty." (1 Timothy 2:14). It's comforting to realize that Paul himself wrote almost the opposite in Romans (5:12), but troubling to see how much the Christian tradition has slandered Eve as the sexually promiscuous woman who leads upright Adam to sin.² It's hard to leave all that baggage behind as some version of Eve as the root of the problem shows up in all kinds of places from Snow White to the recent release of The Jungle Book which I saw a couple of weeks ago. In it the serpent, some kind of giant tree boa, lulls the young boy to near death in the sultry voice of Scarlett Johansson: A slandered Eve and the serpent fused perfectly into one. Thanks, Disney.

¹ The Greek Apocalypse of Moses is part of a group of Jewish writings, dating from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D., that didn't make into the Bible. Most of these texts are falsely attributed to Adam, Moses, and other biblical figures which is why they are termed pseudepigrapha – a Greek word that means "falsely inscribed." Even worse than the Greek Apocalypse of Moses is The Testament of Reuben, where the protagonist warns his children that "women are more easily overcome by the spirit of promiscuity than are men." Women are "an incurable disease ... and an eternal disgrace" (Testament of Reuben 6.1-3). To illustrate his point he goes on to recount how he lusted after his own father's maidservant Bilhah and raped her when she was sleeping in a drunken stupor (Testament of Reuben 3.11-15). This is the story he tells to illustrate the danger that women are to him!!

² Paul does invoke Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3, but emphasizes the "cunning" deception of the serpent, not Eve's gender. In fact, Eve is brought up to illustrate Paul's concern about the Corinthian church thereby accentuating her weakness as an aspect of humanity without any reference to gender.

If we are able to come to the text without all of that baggage, it's hard not to like Eve. What's the big deal about her sin? It's not like she commits any of the biggies. There's no murder, stealing, or even lying involved. The serpent asks her what God said about the tree and she repeats back God's words almost verbatim.³ She doesn't do anything other than question the truth and then act on her conclusions, something that a lot of people in this congregation pride themselves in doing and in teaching to our children, especially to our daughters. If we had a parking lot there'd be more than a few cars with the same "Well behaved woman rarely make history" bumper sticker plastered on them.

Even though you won't find any language about anyone falling from or to anything, that's the lesson that we've taken from this. Disobedience is the beginning of "the Fall." Do what you're told, follow the rules set down by God, don't ask questions. Enjoy your freedom within the boundaries that God sets down but don't try to exceed them. Don't try to be like God.

It's not a bad lesson for human beings most of the time. Trying to make yourself like God has serious consequences. Just ask the victims of people playing God in Hiroshima and Nagasaki or Pearl Harbor, or Auschwitz. Just ask people who flee from the violence of people who put themselves in the seat of God in El Salvador, Mexico, and Guatemala, or Syria, or South Sudan. We sometimes confuse the power that knowledge brings with the right to exercise that power. Eve's decision is a warning about the consequences of exceeding limits put down by God.

Knowledge, like all forms of power, is amoral. And some forms of knowledge we human being are not ready to handle. Maybe some forms of knowledge we'll never be able to fully handle. And yet so ingrained in us is our belief that all knowledge leads to good that whenever the poets or the screenwriters or the novelists raise alarms they are dismissed as anti-intellectual, luddites who won't get with the program, irrational apocalyptic folks who fear advancement. Knowledge is power, but that power needs direction, values, limits.

I wish God had just said that to Eve and to us. "Eve, if you eat the fruit, it's going to cause you a lot of unnecessary trouble. You've got everything you need in the garden. Trust me, you don't want to disrupt that." Or even, "Eve, I'm asking you to trust me on this fruit business. I can't explain why it's a bad idea without you experiencing it and once you've experienced it there's no going back." But God tells them instead that if they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil they'll die. And that's not what happens. They eat the fruit and realize that they are naked.

Now I realize that for some of us, being seen naked might seem as bad as dying. John Calvin said as much in his commentary on the passage – "We cannot behold a man without a sense of shame," the father of the Reformed tradition wrote in the mid 1500s, "yet at the sight of an ass, a dog, or an ox no such feeling will be produced."⁴

³ God tells the human (*ha adam*) not to eat of the tree, Eve adds a prohibition not to touch it, perhaps foreshadowing the violation? Or revealing an inner concern about her penchant for violating the boundary?

⁴ *John Calvin's Commentary on Genesis 1-23*, Chapter 2, verse 25.

But the truth is that the only death that Adam & Eve seem to experience in the moment of their new knowledge is the death of their complete trust in God. That's the only real change that happens when they eat the fruit. The knowledge Adam and Eve received doesn't seem to make them any wiser. It only makes them ashamed. It's the shadow side of our insatiable desire always to know more. Knowing more doesn't always improve our garden. Knowing more sometimes means more anxiety, more pain, more hurt, not less. Knowing more sometimes makes our lives or our community or our world worse not better.

But still we chase after truth, even when that truth is beyond our capacity to comprehend. Even when our inability to handle that truth destroys what's good about our living.

Maybe that's why God threatens something much worse than what actually happens. God knows we'll never be satisfied with childlike trust even though living and dying in this world makes it the only satisfying option.

We want to know more. When Lulu Wang's grandmother was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer she found it inconceivable that her family didn't want her grandmother to know she was sick. Her grandmother was 80 years old, was given 3 months to live, and her family decided not to tell her. Her grandmother lives in China where it's customary for doctors to give bad news to family members rather than directly to patients. Her grandmother's sister, who got the bad news was so worried that her sister would fall into depression, stop eating, and give up, that she decided not to tell her. The whole family agreed to lie which was almost too much for Lulu, raised in the West, to accept. They all traveled to China telling Lulu's grandmother they were making the trip for another family member's wedding even though they all knew they were traveling to tell her goodbye.

Deeply troubled by this lie, Lulu went to her mother who informed her that her grandmother would be happy that they were lying for her sake. "Otherwise," her mother said, "why would [your grandmother] have done the same thing to your grandfather?" Still wanting to know more, Lulu uncovered more secrets. Her grandmother had endured treatment for breast cancer for 9 years but told no one in the family except her sister. While they had been lying to her, she had been lying to them to protect them. Lulu went through with the lie and three years after the doctor first diagnosed Lulu's grandmother with 3 months to live, she was still around, doing well for an 83 year old.

In her reflection on *This American Life*, Lulu confesses that like just about all other Americans she believes it's every person's right to know if they are going to die.⁵ But at the same time she wonders if not knowing is what has kept her grandmother alive. There's an old Chinese belief called chongxi, she says. "Chong means to rinse out, and xi is joy. So chongxi is the belief that you can wash away a misfortune with joy. . . that's essentially what we did."

Eve, like a lot of us, chooses to know. And I can't say that any of us can or will make a different choice. Given the choice between knowing more about who we are or knowing less, I know which choice I would make – I'd take the fruit. The

⁵ "In Defense of Ignorance," *This American Life*, #585, originally aired April 22, 2016. <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/585/transcript>

temptation is to want to know everything as God knows it. To see everything as God sees it. That's what the serpent promises will happen to anyone who eats the fruit. It's why Eve, the mother of all living, reaches out to taste and see.

It's that human trait that spurs us to know ourselves, to build new things, to solve problems, to innovate, to grow. But it's also what undergirds our deep anxiety about not having enough, not being enough, as well as our deep fear that death swallows us up so we'd better resist it for ourselves at all cost, sometimes great cost to others.

It's that fear that is played out in everything from presidential politics to college admissions pressures, to our greedy use of energy, to the drug wars in our streets and our reactions to it. We play God with knowledge we continue to use in ways that are harmful to our world and to each other.

And maybe that's a better lesson we should take from Eve and from Adam since both choose to eat the fruit – not the lesson that questioning God is the root of all sin. That “lesson” has been so abused by the church and monarchs and terrorists, and powers through the centuries that we should be wise enough to resist it. No, rather the truth that we can't pretend to handle the world as God sees it. We can't even handle the truth of ourselves as God sees us. What God sees leads God to fight for our future even more. What we see leads us to shame about who we really are. We can try to walk through this life without finally relinquishing ourselves to God - it's possible to do - but it's miserable to try to put ourselves in the driver's seat. Trust is the hardest of all lessons to learn.

I've had to learn that kind of trust so many times in my life. Going in the CT tube, then under the knife, stepping on a plane especially one I'm not piloting, participating in civil disobedience, letting my daughters out of my sight for moments, then hours, then days, finally eternity, not clenching onto the future of our church so tightly as if our community is my project, or even our project instead of God's, trusting my partner in marriage even when I know she sees me as I am, not as I hope to be seen. It's a hard path to choose, but it's always there. Maybe because of Eve and Adam it's a choice instead of a mandate, an option instead of part of our design.

It's the path that God offers to us this side of Eden, the one that makes hope and love possible in the face of knowledge that drives many to fear and death. It's the path that this good God keeps offering to us.