

“Detour in the Garden”

Life is a Highway, Read the Map – sermon #2

Genesis 3:1-24

Last week, we began a new series called, “Life is a Highway: Read the Map.” The idea is simple: Life is a journey, and the Bible provides us direction. Just like a map, the Bible won’t literally tell you where to go, but it will show you possibilities, obstacles and hazards along the way. If you read the Bible, you will find your journey much more enjoyable and fulfilling.

Last week, we read about our Point of Origin. We learned that we are created beings and that God is the source of our life. This week, we continue in the book of Genesis, where we find humanity at its first crossroads.

Crossroads make life interesting. I did a lot of driving last Friday, coming back from seminary in Dayton, Ohio. I took the backroads through northern Ohio, and it was quite the experience. I was glad for my GPS, because I got on some county roads that seemed to lead to nowhere, and at many intersections, I would have had no idea which way to turn. Every crossroad is a decision.

I love to read “Twist-a-Plot” or “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” books. Each book has multiple endings; you can’t read them cover-to-cover. On just about every page, you have to make a choice, and the choice you make sends you somewhere else in the book. Some choices lead to good endings. You could become a millionaire, be elected President, or recover the lost treasure. Or you could have choices like this, on page 114: “If you want to live through this catastrophe, turn to page 43. If you want to die, turn to page 37.”

What I love most about these books is the sense of control I have as I read. At each crossroad, I could make a choice that would change my direction, change

my future. But it was always my choice, not the author's. The ability to decide is alluring, even tempting.

Today's bible story feels a lot like a crossroads or a twist-a-plot book. Here is humanity's first big decision. Adam and Eve are being tempted by the serpent. What will they decide? Well, they choose poorly, and, unlike a twist-a-plot book, they do not get to go back and flip the page differently. But all is not lost. Let's look at the story more closely. Specifically, what was it that tempted Adam and Eve in the first place?

We have to go back to Genesis 2:8-9 and 15-17 to get the back story. Creation story number two says God made a garden and put the man in it. Then God provided all sorts of food for the man to eat. The man's job was to care for the garden, and the one thing the man was not supposed to do is eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God created a woman as a companion for the man, and everything seemed to be honky-dory.

Then in chapter 3, the serpent came along and told Adam and Eve that God was holding out on them. Notice, both humans were present. The scripture says so in 3:6. Think about it: how did Eve know not to touch the tree? God gave that command to Adam in chapter 2 before God created Eve. Adam must have told Eve what God commanded. They both knew. Adam and Eve made their decision together. They both chose to eat the forbidden fruit.

Why? What did they really want? They had everything. They had the presence of God. They had relationship, love and abundance. Adam and Eve weren't hungry for food. They were hungry for knowledge. They were tempted by the unknown. They were tempted to become like God, even though they were already made in the image of God.

What really did Adam and Eve stand to gain from eating the fruit? They already knew “good.” The first creation story says everything in their world was good. The sun, the moon, the earth, the oceans, the sky, the birds, the fish, the animals, and the plants – they were all good, very good. The only thing Adam and Eve could gain by eating the fruit was to know evil. They already knew what was good.

Once the fruit was eaten, the consequences of their choice were clear. The detour started; they flipped the script God had intended for them. One commentary makes this observation: “Ironically, what the man and woman discover is not that they are gods, but that they are naked – weak, vulnerable, and helpless, having rejected their dependence upon God.”¹ They sew fig leaves over themselves in a futile attempt to cover their shame. They hide from God. When God confronts them about their decision, they start to blame each other. The story goes from bad to worse. What a tragedy.

At this point, we could join that blame game. If only Eve hadn’t listened to the serpent. If only Adam had spoken up. If only they had gone to page 3 instead of 14! They should have taken the left turn in Albuquerque, as Bugs Bunny would say. Then our world would be so much different, so much better.

But our blame would be no more productive than theirs. After all, this is really a story about us. How often are we asked to choose good or evil? I would say, every day. Every day God offers us a chance to trust him and love him, to choose good, and yet we think we know better. We think God is holding out on us. God won’t let us have any “fun.” And so we choose against our consciences, against our better judgement, and we contort the story and go off on a detour,

¹ HBC, p. 87

away from the path God would have us walk. What is the expression?

“Forbidden fruits create many jams.” This story is not just about two folks in the distant past. It is about us, here and now.

Like Adam and Eve, we make bad decisions. And we can feel rejected, cursed, and burdened by guilt and shame. We can even blame God. “Why did you allow this to happen, God? Why didn’t you stop me from making that choice?”

The truth is, we all have freewill. It was a gift given to Adam and Eve, and it is the same gift given to us. We can always choose to obey or reject God. And when we choose evil, we feel the consequences. The world feels the consequences.

So, is that it? Does the story just end? Is there any hope?

Of course there is hope. God is not done writing the story of the world. God looks at the brokenness in the Garden, and after explaining to Adam and Eve the privileges that they have lost, God does something amazing and unexpected. God provides Adam and Eve clothes to wear. Genesis 3:21 - “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” You could make a theological case that God has ordained shopping as a proper response to overcoming a bad day! An animal gave its life so that Adam and Eve’s sin, guilt, and shame could be covered. God could have kicked the couple to the curb, but instead, God provided for them.

God provides for us today, as well. We all mess up. We all make bad decisions. And God provides forgiveness through his Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sin and redeem us. God so loved the world that he sent us his only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life. (John

3:16) Remember, God told Adam and Eve that they would no longer have eternal life when they left the Garden. Yet, through Jesus, that curse is reversed, and eternal life is offered to us once again. If you ever think your story has ended in catastrophe, that you've come to the page that says “The End,” Jesus speaks a word of renewal and says, “No! Turn the page with me and see how your story goes on.”

This world is full of people who choose evil over good. It is also filled with those who choose good over evil. Every day is a day for us in the Garden, deciding what fruit we are going to eat. Will we choose good fruit? Will we remain in the knowledge of God's goodness, love, kindness, and forgiveness? Or in the knowledge that leads to brokenness, hate, and pain?

This past week at seminary, my classmates spent much time talking about intercultural and interreligious encounters. We talked about the pain that has been caused in history, even by the Church, because people chose evil, arrogance, and selfishness. We talked about how our fears can drive our decisions, and we learned ways of dealing with tension, embracing new environments, and learning to see all people as children of God. Part of this course was meant to prepare me to take a trip to South Africa next year. But part was to reflect on what I teach my children and my congregation about our choices and how we treat others.

This weekend is the anniversary of the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia; the white supremacy gathering and counter-protest clash that left one dead and dozens injured. Think about what this event represents: some choose the fruits of prejudice, violence, and hatred, and some choose respect, peace, diversity and love. How do people learn these values? Who teaches them? What decisions do they see their parents, teachers, and friends make?

Each choice we make affects the world around us. Our decisions impact generations to come. Adam and Eve’s choice impacted their children for generations. We inherited their brokenness.

Thankfully, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to save us through his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus’ choice has also left a lasting change for the generations that followed.

We all have a choice to make, what legacy we will leave our children and our world. You can choose goodness even if you’re not a Christian. The church does not have a monopoly on God’s goodness. I fully believe that every person has the Holy Spirit inside them, speaking through their conscience. We either listen to our conscience or we don’t, and the more often we ignore it, the harder it becomes to hear God’s voice.

The beauty of grace is that, just as Adam and Eve were one decision away from losing that goodness, we are always just one decision away from regaining that goodness. We don’t have to choose evil. We can choose forgiveness. We can choose to give our lives to Christ and renew a right relationship with God. We can choose to be part of God’s people, the church, who help us walk in goodness. We can choose to find ways in our community to spread peace and justice. We can choose kindness and patience. We can confront hate with love, poverty with generosity, pollution with conservation. That is our choice. That is our crossroads. Our fruit.

The choice in the Garden of Eden is the same choice we have today. We always have the opportunity to choose good, and with God’s help, that’s exactly what we can do.

Memory Verse: James 1:14 (NIV)

“But each one is tempted when by his own evil desires he is lured away and enticed.”

Reflection Questions:

1. How does Adam and Eve’s story relate to your life? When have you made a decision you wish you could take back?
2. In what ways do you see the “blame game” perpetuated in the world today?
3. How does Jesus Christ change your story?