

SERMON TITLE – “Genesis 3:1-7: “Did God Really Say...?”

TEXT – Genesis 3

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INTRODUCTION

When James and I were mapping out the sermon schedule for the next few months, and I saw that Genesis 3 would fall on my Sunday to preach, I almost laughed. This wasn't because I think Genesis 3 is a particularly humorous passage of Scripture – as we'll see it certainly is not – or because I think sin is funny or anything like that.

The reason I almost laughed was because I've often been accused of having a rather morbid preoccupation with the problem of sin and evil. I know, it's hard to believe that a sunny optimist such as myself would find this topic interesting but ever since I was a little boy I remember thinking often about this big question of *what's wrong with the world?*

- Why isn't it the way we would like it to be?
- Why do people get sick and die?
- Why do people say and do things to hurt others?
- Why are our best efforts sometimes fruitless while other people seem to get their way effortlessly?
- Why does it rain when we want sunshine and why is it dry when we need rain?
- Why are there weeds in my dad's field and why does he force my brother and I out into the sweltering sun to hoe them out?
- Why doesn't my favourite hockey team win?
- Etc, etc, etc...

Well, the existential anxieties of a young boy gradually morphed into a more formal and literary interest in evil. As a younger man, I devoured Russian novels by authors like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Solzhenitsyn – stories that were dark and gloomy, and often portrayed human beings at their very worst (and their very best). Then, in university, I took philosophy courses on the problem of evil, and wrote my undergraduate thesis on how we are to understand God's foreknowledge and the existence of evil. The year prior to our coming to Nanaimo was spent writing *another* thesis dealing with the rise of atheism and its relation to the problem of evil. Evil, evil, evil.

And so, today I get to preach on Genesis 3 – the introduction of sin, disunity, chaos, pain, and death into the world. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

I guess we'll have to buckle up for a bumpy, unpleasant ride – just grit our teeth and get through this difficult text before moving on to the more hopeful stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and others. Right?

Well, maybe not. I think that this morning's text does, indeed, describe a dark moment in cosmic history – a radical departure from God's intention in creation, a spoiling, and a defacing of what, as we saw in previous weeks, God called "very good." But even in Genesis 3 there is genuine good news that we need to have if we're going to understand our world, our own lives, and what we are to be and to do.

GENESIS 3

Before we actually get into Genesis 3 itself, let's remember why we're undertaking this series on Genesis:

Genesis lays the foundation for the rest of the biblical story, and it orients us to a particular way of looking at the world.

It gives us kind of a container or framework within which to put everything else; it is a lens through which we look at all that will follow in the bible, and a lens through which we can look at our own lives and the world we live in.

We've seen the basic contours of this lens:

- God created everything in the entire cosmos.
- This creation is very good.
- God stands beyond creation and alone is to be worshipped.
- We are made in God's image
 - o we are (equally) special
 - o we have been given a job to do (care for the earth)

In this lens there is stability, order, and responsibility. The world as God created it is good and full of potential and promise.

WHAT WENT WRONG

Of course the picture above doesn't tell the whole story, does it? If only it did! We don't have to look very far to realize that our world is not a blissful paradise where all human beings understand themselves to be the unique creation of a caring God, where we all work as grateful and humble stewards of the wonderful world God has made, where God alone is worshipped as the true source of all goodness and beauty.

Something has gone very wrong. There has been a significant wrench thrown into the plans. And according to Genesis 3, it is human beings who bear responsibility for this being the case.

To understand what happens in Genesis 3, we need to rewind a bit. In Genesis 2:15, we read the following:

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die."

Now, when we pick up the story in Genesis 3, a serpent has arrived on the scene (the question of what the serpent was doing in God's good world is an old and mysterious one, and we'll leave it aside for today – the short answer is “we're not told”) and he begins to plant some questions in the minds of Adam and Eve.

The dialogue between Eve and the serpent is worth dwelling because it subtly misconstrues what God actually said and opens the door to the trouble that will come:

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' "

4 "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. 5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Both in the serpent's statement to the woman – “Did God really say, ‘you must not eat from any tree in the garden?’ – and in her response – God said “you must not eat from the tree *or touch it*” – we see a distortion of what God actually said. In fact, God did not forbid them from eating from *any* tree in the garden – the restriction was focused on one tree; nor did he say anything about *touching* the tree. In both of these apparently minor statements, God's truthfulness and reliability are questioned. God's authority to determine the shape of reality is challenged. The paradigm James laid out in the last two weeks – where God is God and human beings and nature are not – is implicitly subverted or called into question here.

And this opening of the door, this challenging of the order and structure that God had instituted in creation leads to the disastrous climax of Genesis 3 that we are all familiar with.

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

With this act of disobedience, sin enters the world.

The first human beings were not content to be image-bearers – to have a secondary, derivative authority or position; they wanted to be “like God” in a way that they were never intended to be.

The serpent was correct, in a sense, for Adam and Eve’s eyes *were* opened, and they *did* know good and evil, but they knew it from the irreversible perspective of having *chosen* evil over good.

It’s easy to read Genesis 3 as the story of how Adam and Eve ruined things for the rest of us. When I was a kid (hoeing weeds in the field on a hot day, no doubt) I certainly thought of it this way. *They* were to blame for my misery – if only *they* hadn’t taken the fruit, we’d all have lived blissfully ever after. As far as explanations go, this one had a certain simplistic plausibility to it and it had the happy consequence of taking the focus off of me!

But Genesis 3 was not written so that we would have someone to blame for our predicament. Genesis 3 explains our world but it also gives us a lens through which to examine ourselves.

What we see is that we’re not very different than Adam and Eve. We all share their instinct to rise up against prohibitions. If something is painted in a negative context we seem to be magnetically drawn to it. We tend to chafe under authority of any kind, and crave the autonomy to be and do what we want.

Like Adam and Eve we are sometimes reluctant to take responsibility for our behaviour when we go astray but like Adam and Eve, the consequences of our choices stay with us.

Like Adam and Eve, we do not like having the terms of our reality dictated to us, and like Adam and Eve we rebel.

A trivial example: when I was 15 or 16, many of my friends were getting their ears pierced. Well, I knew that good Mennonite boys did *not* get earrings, but I didn’t really care what my grandparents, uncles, and aunts might think. They didn’t determine my reality for me, *I did*. So I went and got it done, and suffered through all of the scorn and questioning of my masculinity that came along with it. Why was I willing to “suffer” like this? Because I had decided that I alone was fit to decide the matter. I was not going to have the terms of what I could or could not do with my personal appearance dictated to me.

The consequences of my actions were pretty minor, but the mechanism at work was, I think, roughly similar to what we see in Genesis 3.

Fundamentally, the choice of Adam and Eve in the garden – and the choice that echoes down through the ages into our own lives – is a deliberate decision to call into question the biblical worldview we’ve sketched out over the last few weeks.

It is an attempt to rise above our creaturely status, our position as image-bearers in a good world, with good work to do, under a providential and reliable God.

It is a decision to entertain lies about God and his instructions, to ask “Did God really say...?”

The story of the Fall is, therefore, the story of *our* lives. It is the story of our trying to overstep the limits of our creation and to fail to trust that God has ordered things for the benefit of his entire world – including us! And because of our choices, God’s world groans and suffers. The vision of *shalom* that God intended for his creation remains a far-off dream.

GOOD NEWS

Genesis 3 tells us of the origins of human misery and the misery of the entire world, but that’s not all it does. It also reminds us of another crucially important piece in the biblical worldview that we’re trying to lay out in this series:

As God’s image-bearers, human beings *and the choices they make matter*. They matter a lot!

God does compel Adam and Eve to obey; he does not create them as puppets that he can manipulate however he wants. He gives them the freedom to *choose* to love and obey him. The fact that this freedom was and is abused should not minimize the significance of the gift God gave to humanity.

The importance of human choice (and the implicit reminder of human dignity that comes along with it) is found throughout Scripture.

- **Moses**

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

- **Joshua’s speech, renewing the covenant at Schechem:**

“...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve,

- **The message throughout the prophets**

*You have strayed away – **return** to me!*

- **Jesus**

Jesus’ question to Peter about his own identity:

*"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"
Peter answered, "God's Messiah."*

In each of the above passages, human beings are given a choice. One of the prominent themes of Scripture is that God honours the choices we make, even when they are bad ones that lead only to death and misery.

The story of salvation we find in Scripture has many twists and tragic turns – and the Fall in Genesis 3 is perhaps the most tragic of them all. But even though sin and evil have entered into God's good world, we do not cease to be God's image-bearers.

While Scripture shows us all of the trouble that human beings get into when they misuse God's good gifts, it also repeatedly reinforces the themes of human dignity and freedom to choose God, to choose life.

Genesis 3 tells us that God loves us enough to allow us to disobey him, to reject the life-giving parameters he instituted in creation. The message is unmistakable and worth repeating:

Human beings and the choices they make matter to God.

We need this reminder in our world of astrologers, karma, superstition, etc. where people confusedly latch on to anything that might possibly be able to be manipulated in the cosmos for their own benefit.

From Oprah's "Secret" to tarot card readers to health and wealth preachers who say that if you have enough faith God will make you rich and healthy, everyone is looking for that magic "silver bullet," that quick fix to their problems.

Genesis 3 says that there is no quick fix: God works *with* and *through* human choices and the consequences they lead to. We have the privilege and the freedom in our everyday lives to choose to let God determine reality, to embrace our position as dependent creatures – stewards of the good world that God has made – and to partner with him in the process of redeeming it.

So in CONCLUSION

I believe that Genesis 3 gives us two important pieces – one tragic and one hopeful – that are absolutely crucial for us to understand the Biblical story and our mandate as "kingdom people":

1. TRAGEDY: The story of the Fall is *our* story

- a. Like Adam and Eve, we are inclined to push against the parameters God has set up for us, to ask, even if only in our own minds, “Did God really say...?”
2. HOPE - There is a dignity and a responsibility to being human that is not erased with the fall
 - a. As we will see as we continue our journey through Genesis, God does not give up on his rebellious image-bearers, nor does he remove from us the dignity of choice
 - b. Rather, he institutes a plan of salvation to heal and redeem his fallen world

Genesis 3 tells an important part of the story of our world, and it explains a good deal of our experience as human beings who sin, experience guilt, pain, and frustration, who cannot save themselves from the condition they have brought upon themselves.

But Genesis 3 does not tell the whole story. **Sin does not have the last word in God’s story, and neither does it need to have the last word in our own individual stories.** Our God is a God of hope, a God of second chances, a God who leads without compelling, who guides and directs without manipulating, who lovingly persuades and calls us back to himself and his intentions for the world without overriding our wills or negating our choice.

We only get faint glimmers of hope in Genesis 3 – the mysterious foreshadowing in 3:15 that Adam’s seed will one day crush the serpent’s head, God’s refusal to allow Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of life and live forever in their fallen state – but there are hints that while sin is powerful, and the problems human beings introduced to the world are serious, God’s love and faithfulness to his creation are more powerful even than our sin.

Thanks be to God.