

DAYS TO WANDER
Randall Tremba
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First Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted [or, "tested" as metal is tested] by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

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

The LORD God put Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded them, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 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."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. It said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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.'"

But the serpent said, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

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.

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—to *which we might add, and ever since humans have been inventing personas for themselves so they nor anyone else would ever know exactly who or what they are.*

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I've been fascinated by this story of the first two humans, the forbidden fruit and the talking snake ever since I was a kid. What kid doesn't like that kind of story, especially the butt naked part?!

It's a serious but fun story that got twisted over time into a diabolical and deadly doctrine. You know, the classic Christian notion that because Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit every human born ever since has been born in sin, a terminal disease that leads to hell unless you swallow the one and only cure which—surprise, surprise—only the authorized agents of the church could dispense.

It's called the doctrine of original sin.

Listen to this from a 17th century New England Primer for children: *In Adam's fall we sinned all*. That notion has haunted and crippled people for a thousand years or more.

I don't know about you, but it's what I learned in church. And since first impressions are lasting impressions, it is hard to get it out of our heads, out of our hearts, out of the church and out of our culture. But we must keep trying.

Forty or so years ago I happened upon a book by Eric Fromm: *You Shall Be As Gods*. Eric Fromm was a renowned psychologist. He was also Jewish and student of the scriptures.

The title of the book comes from this Adam and Eve story. The serpent said, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you shall be as God, knowing good and evil," which is an expression that simply means, *everything*. You will know everything and will have many ways of knowing. You will be as gods.

It's possible to see the story of Adam and Eve not as a tragic fall into sin, but an ascent, an arising or an evolution out of the animal world into humanity. In that view this becomes a story of our original blessing as humans, blessed with insatiable curiosity and awesome creativity. Which, as the serpent said, makes us god like, with powers to create and destroy like no other species on this planet.

It's a mixed blessing to be sure, but a blessing nonetheless. We've learned to split the atom and there's no way to unlearn it.

This mythic folk tale of Adam and Eve was never meant to be a scientific explanation of human origins. It was meant to portray the human predicament—how it is that we are so much like animals and yet so different, including the risks that go along with awesome creativity and insatiable curiosity.

I'm guessing that over the course of a million years of humanoid evolution, humans starting asking questions. Eventually they couldn't help but notice a mysterious difference between them and their closest animal cousins. And so around many a campfire our great ancestor put their hunches into folktales.

What makes us different—besides opposable thumbs (really!)?

One answer—out of the tale before us—is: *an insatiable thirst for knowledge that not even God can stop*.

According to this story, Eve couldn't help herself from grasping the alluring fruit of knowledge despite a stern warning from "God." But was this perhaps a way of luring evolution forward?

And did you notice who nudged Eve on? It's the serpent, a companion from the animal world that urges her to stand on her own two legs, to reach upward and take, what we might call, the next evolutionary step, a step that became a quantum leap of consciousness, and with it the possibility—unlike any other animal—of shaping our own destiny.

Eve gave birth to the possibility of becoming human and soon thereafter Adam and Eve found themselves wandering east of Eden, outside the garden paradise, on a quest in search of something beyond themselves they couldn't name.

Which bring us to Jesus wandering in the “wilderness” in what looks very much like a vision quest. It, too, has the look of a mythic tale with Jesus, the “Son of God” standing in as the icon for humanity.

How shall we live as human beings, as children begotten of the future? The devil poses three tests for Jesus, the way metal is tested.

Turn these stones into bread and never hunger again. Shall I fill my life with bread?

No.

Jump off this tower and let God save you from injury and pain. Turn God into a Superman. Shall I fill my life with faith in a supernatural God that rescues me from pain so that I never suffer?

No.

Kneel before me and I will give you the kingdoms of the world and all their riches. Turn the world into your oyster so you never want for anything again. Shall I possess the whole world?

No.

To each of those three alluring tests Jesus said NO, which makes you wonder what’s left? To what can he—and thus we—say, YES?

According to the gospel story, Jesus left the wilderness, invited a few companions to join him on a journey, to wander with him among the broken places and broken peoples of the earth.

Walk with me. Let us feed the hungry. Heal the sick. Welcome the homeless. Befriend the outcast. Release prisoners. Bring hope to the poor. And love our enemies even if it kills us.

You see, the one thing the devil didn’t offer Jesus was love.

Yes, bread is good but bread is not enough. Faith is good, but faith is not enough. The world is good but the world is not enough.

Only love is enough.

Only love can make us alive. Only love can evolve us.

Only love can feed a hungry world. Only love can transform injury and suffering into hope. Only love is greater than the whole world.

Only love can break open a heart and only love can heal it again.

Who knows what you yet may become as you walk the way of love. Who knows what’s hidden in the unexplored places of your world and in the unborn possibilities of your life.

*And so let this be
a season for wandering
for trusting the breaking
for tracing the tear
that will return you
to the One who waits*

*who watches
who works within the rending
to make your heart whole.*

[from Rend Your Heart, Jan Richardson]

SONG: "In the Bulb There Is a Flower"