

Text: Genesis 3:1-7

Title: "Messing With Our Minds About the One Command"

(Fifth in a series of sermons in Genesis 1-11: "The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories")

"Did God Say?"

An apparently innocent question, posed by an apparently benign being.

"Did God Say?"

"Did God really say?" With the nuance of: "Would a good God ever say anything like that? If God really is for you...if God really does want your very best...would God ever say 'You shall not'?"

On the Sunday mornings of this Fall, we have been making our way through the opening chapters of the Bible, through Genesis 1-11. We have been trying to listen carefully to what I am calling "The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories."

No chapter of the story serves that end better than what we read in Genesis 3, verses 1-7. Here we have revealed for us the fundamental struggle of human existence. Here we learn that we would never have discovered on our own: here we learn that someone is messing with our minds. An enemy, God's enemy – "on earth is not his equal" sang Martin Luther – is messing with our minds about the one command God has given humanity.

Let us review what we have learned over the past weeks.

From Genesis 1, we have discovered what every person alive today needs to hear; we learn that the universe is not an accident. It did not just "pop into being" out of nothing. Someone wanted it to come to being. From Genesis One, we discover that every person alive today longs to hear; that we humans are not an accident either. Whatever was involved in the process of bringing human beings into existence, **we** are not an accident. **You** are not an accident. **I** am not an accident. Someone wanted us to come into being! Someone wants us to exist! Someone made us happen! The Living God made us happen!

From Genesis 1, we learn that we humans were made in the image and likeness of God. Nothing else in all of creation bears this significance! "Let us make humankind in Our image according to Our likeness." We were brought into being to represent the Creator in and to the rest of creation. And we were brought into being to reflect the nature and character of the Creator in and to the rest of creation. When the rest of creation looks at us it is to see something of who the Creator is and what the Creator is like. What Dignity!

From Genesis 2 we have discovered what being made in the image of God involves. The Living God is a relational God. Indeed, the Living God is relationship. "Us."

“Our.” The Creator of all things can speak of Himself using plural pronouns! “Us.”
“Our.” To be made in the image of the relational God is to be made for relationship.

In Genesis 2, we see “fleshed out” in picto-graphic form, the four-fold relational existence for which the relational God has made us. We were created for a relationship with the earth, a relationship with others, a relationship with the self, and a relationship with the Living God. And “in the beginning” all four relationships worked....and worked in harmony.

And from Genesis 2 we learned that the enjoyment of that four-fold relational harmony hinges on one command. Only one command. Only one. “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.” God has given the first humans everything they needed to live “fully human, fully alive.” Everything. “From any tree you may eat freely.” God withheld nothing we humans need. “Any...freely.” Just one command. Only one. “You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

We discovered that the phrase “knowing good and evil” has a particular meaning. We discovered that to the first readers of Genesis, “the knowledge of good and evil” refers to the kind of knowledge that makes us think we can live independently of anyone else. (Daniel P. Fuller) We do not need this kind of knowledge. Indeed such knowledge is “the kiss of death”.

Only one command. One good command.

I paraphrase: “Adam, you and Eve are glorious creatures. I have made you in my image with the capacity for all kinds of creativity! But it only works if you remain who you are, a creature dependent upon the Creator. You be you and I will be me. You be human and I will be God. If you try to be your own god, your world will fall apart. You cannot bear the weight of making the world work on your own. I am the vine; you are the branches; live in Me, and I in you, for apart from Me you can do nothing. In the day you try to go it alone...to make life work without me...you will die.” One Command. Only one.

Then Genesis 3. Enter the serpent. With his apparently innocent question, “Did God say?”

Who or what is this serpent. From the rest of the story, from the rest of the Bible, we learn that the serpent is an enemy...of God. The serpent does not like the Living God. Why? We are not told. All we are told is that he experiences the Living God as a threat and opposes himself to all that God desires. From the rest of the Bible, we learn that the serpent in the garden is the being called “Satan” or “the devil.” The word “Satan” simply means “adversary”, “accuser” -- especially an adversary of God, an accuser of God. The word “devil” simply means “slanderer”, “deceiver” – especially a slanderer of God, who speaks deceptively of God. Jesus would later call this being “the father of lies” and “the liar” (John 8:44; also 2Corinthians 11:3; Revelation 12:9,20:2).

Now, why does the author of Genesis 3 not call the serpent "Satan" or "the devil"? Because as Derek Kidner argues, Genesis 3 does not want to give humanity an excuse for disobedience and the resulting fall. Genesis wants to keep clear about who is responsible for the ruin of God's good world. The devil did not bring about the collapse of the four-fold relational harmony. Yes, Satan enters the picture and starts messing with Adam's and Eve's minds. But Satan did not cause the collapse of our four-fold relational existence. We did. The comedian Flip Wilson used to say, "The devil made me do it." That is not true. It is never true. The devil can entice us to do it. But **we** always make us do it... So Genesis 3 does not use the terms "devil" or "Satan" to make sure he does not get the credit he seeks. The author simply calls him "the serpent".

A creature! Mark that. A mere creature. "A beast of the field whom the Lord God had made," says the text. Genesis 3:1 – "whom the Lord God had made."

And that is good news! The serpent was created **by** God. Not as a Satan, not as a devil... as we shall see in a moment. God did not create an evil creature and set him in God's good world. God created a **good** creature... who, at some point as the story is unfolding, made a choice that resulted in becoming evil (Isaiah 14:13-14). The serpent was created. And therefore can be un-created! That is what the Garden text wants us to realize. The being who chose to become God's enemy was made by God! And, therefore, can be un-made by God!

It is C.S. Lewis who puts things into perspective for me. He wrote a book entitled "The Screwtape Letters" in which he imagines a senior devil helping a junior devil do the work of undermining and un-doing the faith of a new Christian. In the introduction to the book, he writes:

"The commonest question is whether I really "believe in the Devil." Now, if by "the Devil" you mean a power opposite to God and, like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly NO. There is no un-created being except God. God has no opposite. No being could attain a "perfect badness: opposite to the perfect goodness of God; for when you have taken away every kind of good thing (intelligence, will, memory, energy, and existence itself) there would be none of him left.

The proper question is whether I believe in devils. I do. That is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God and, as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils. They do not differ in nature from good angels, but their nature is depraved. Devil is the opposite of angel only as Bad Man is the opposite of Good Man. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael. (the archangel)." (p.vii)

God has no opposite!

The serpent was created by God...but not to be "serpenty". The snake was made by God but not to be "snakey". God did not create the devil as the devil. God created an

angel, a good angel who made a choice, who exercised freedom in a wrong direction and became evil. And does not like the Living God nor what the Living God makes.

Now, focus where the Genesis text goes...on the serpent's way with the first humans.

Step one. The serpent isolates the woman; the serpent isolates the woman from the man, from human community. For off by ourselves, we are sitting ducks, so to speak.

No human being can stand alone. More to the point: None of us can keep believing alone. We need community to keep believing. We need fellowship to be strong in faith.

One of the movements of our time is toward what some are calling "a church-less faith." Because, as it is argued, the church is not all it ought to be; and because, in some cases, the church is so problematic; one simply needs to leave the church and develop "a church-less faith."

Anne Rice recently announced that she is quitting the church; "in the name of Christ," as she put it; she is quitting the Christian Church. Anne Rice became famous for her books about a vampire. But in 1998 she came to faith in Jesus. And wrote two fabulous books on Jesus: "Christ the Lord; Out of Egypt," on His early childhood and "Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana" on His early ministry. But now she says she has "had it" with the church. She has not given up on Jesus... just on the church.

I understand and share some of her concerns. But I grieve for her. For very few people can stay faithful to Jesus on their own. As problematic as Christian Community can be ...and has always been... we need each other to keep believing.

The serpent gets Eve off by herself...isolated.

Step two. The serpent then gets her to question God's word. The serpent does not come as a devil with a pitchfork or as a vampire. He does not come to the woman as an evil being. He comes as an interested fellow-seeker. "Did God say?" So much more effective...for the serpent is flattering Eve, suggesting that she can think about reality as well as or even better than God!

Here I simply have to quote the German preacher theologian Helmut Thelicke in his collection of sermons on Genesis 1-11 entitled "How the World Began".

He writes: "The first thing that strikes us is this: The drama of temptation, which now begins and puts a sudden end to the vision of a sound and healthy world, begins not with the crash of the kettle drum but rather with the sound of oboes. One might even say that it has in it hymn-like motifs." (123-124)

Thelicke continues:

"The overture of this dialogue is thoroughly pious, and the serpent introduces himself as a completely serious and religious beast. He does not say: "I am an atheistic monster and now I am going to take your paradise,

your innocence and loyalty, and turn it all upside down.” Instead he says: “Children, today we’re going to talk about religion, we’re going to discuss the ultimate things.”

Well, something like that immediately inspires confidence. After all, blackguards and rascals do not dabble in such topics. When you talk about pious things you immediately secure for yourself the alibi of serious-mindedness and sincerity.

So he begins by asking, “Did God—this God whom we all revere; even I, the serpent, honor him dearly—did our revered God say that you should not eat of any tree of the garden?”

In other words, the serpent is trying to start a discussion, something like a theological discussion about the “Word of God.” So there is not a trace of doubt—oh, no! The devil himself believes in God. He takes his stand on the fact of “God.”

In any case, he seems always to plan his tactics from this quarter. The Tempter in the wilderness too did not say to Jesus Christ; “You are a fool to obey your heavenly Father.” He too cited nothing but Scripture passages and pious sayings when he urged Him to make bread of stones, leap from the pinnacle of the temple, and accept the kingdoms of this world from his, the devil’s hand. The devil acts more pious than a nun and knows his Bible better than a professor of the Old Testament or a Jehovah’s Witness. This reptile would even lift his eyes devoutly to heaven, if he had the eyelids to do it with.

So this is the first point that we must note here: the Tempter always operates in disguise. He hides behind a mask of harmless, indeed, pious benevolence. All temptations in life begin in sugared form.” (124-125).

Step two: The serpent invites Eve to question God’s word.

Step Three. The insidious step: the serpent twists God’s word. Ever so slightly at the beginning. Blatantly so by the end of the “pious” conversation.

Satan would try this again with Jesus. He could quote God’s word to Jesus, twisting it ever so slightly. But it did not work. For Jesus knew God’s word better than the enemy.

The evil-one still comes at us with God’s word but with it out of context or altered in some little way.

And here is the key to understanding the story: the serpent twists God’s word in a specific direction. God’s enemy twists Gods’ word in a specific direction, wanting us to make a false deduction about God’s nature and character.

Listen to the serpent’s first speech. Genesis 3:1 – “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?” Well? Has God said that?...“You shall not eat from any tree of the garden”? Look at what the serpent has done. He leaves out the word “freely.” God said, “of any tree of the garden you may freely eat.” And he transfers the prohibition “you shall not” from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” to “any tree of the garden.”

What is he doing? He is raising suspicion...suspicion about the goodness of God. He is interjecting the idea that God might be holding back on something. "You shall not eat from any tree of the garden." He is getting Eve to wonder about God's motives. "You shall not eat from any tree of the garden." To paraphrase: "Eve, God is speaking His "you shall not" because He really does not want the best for you."

The serpent does this with all of God's commands. He sneaks in the suspicion that God speaks prohibitions – "you shall not" – because God really does not want the best for us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: the serpent "pretends somehow to know something about the profundity of the true God....The serpent claims to know more about God than man....The serpent knows of a greater, nobler God who does not need such a prohibition." (Creation and Fall, 66). The serpent is raising the possibility with Eve that God is stingy.

"Did God say, "you shall not eat from any tree of the garden;?" No! God did NOT say "you shall not eat from any tree of the garden." God said, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely." He only prohibits eating from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." God only prohibited us from trying to live independently of Him...a good prohibition!

Now listen to Eve's response. Listen carefully. Something has gone wrong in her soul. Genesis 3:2-3: "From the fruit of the tree of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'"

Notice how Eve mis-quoted Gods' words...revealing the fact that she is now suspicious of God.

1. She leaves out "any" and "freely". God has said "from any tree you may eat freely." She leaves out those words of generosity and quotes God to say "From the fruit of the trees we may eat."

I have done this many times. Luke 12:32, Jesus says: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for the Father has chosen to give you the Kingdom". Did I quote Jesus correctly? No! I left out "your" ... "your Father" ...not just "the Father". And I left out the word "gladly." "Your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom." Eve leaves out "any" and "freely."

2. She adds "in the middle." "But from the tree in the middle of the garden...." The tree is not in the middle. The prohibited tree, "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," is not in the middle. "The Tree of Life" is in the middle (2:9). But not "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Adding "in the middle" says that the prohibition is becoming a problem for Eve.
3. She adds "or touch it." "God said, 'You shall not eat it or touch it.'" God never said "do not touch." That might be inherent in "do not eat from it" but God never said "do not touch." Again, Eve is beginning to doubt that God is wholly disposed toward humanity's good.

4. Notice also that she plays down the severity of the warning. "Lest you die," she says. God had said, "You **surely** will die." The slight changing of God's words signifies that Eve is now beginning to question God's character. I detect in her mind that the serpent wants her to think, "Would a good God really let us die? Would a good God really make such a statement... 'you shall surely die'?"
5. And Eve does not speak of God as God speaks of God. The text of Genesis 2 and 3 speaks of God as "the LORD God." Not just the generic "God." But "the LORD God." "The LORD" in Hebrew is Yahweh. The name by which God calls Himself and wants to be called. God's personal name. Yahweh. The covenant name: "I will be your God, You will be My people". "All I am is placed at your disposal; all that makes me God, I give to you." Having left out "any" and "freely"... and having added "in the middle" and "do not touch"... her suspicion is now truly revealed in leaving off "the LORD." God is now only God – not Yahweh God, the good and generous God who makes Himself wholly available to humanity.

So the serpent then abandons the subtlety and reveals his true agenda. Genesis 3:4-5: "You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes shall be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The serpent calls God a liar. "You surely shall not die. Again I paraphrase: "Why would a good God ever say you humans will suffer the consequences of disobedience?" What is the big deal about one little act? How could such a little act possibly ruin anything let alone lead to death? How silly Eve. 'You surely shall not die.'"

The serpent continues: "Besides Eve, 'God knows...'" . Eve, God does not want you to be like Him. God does not want you to be as happy as He is. That is why He has spoken the prohibition.

The serpent continues: "God knows that you will be like God, knowing good and evil." True... to choose to eat of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" does lead to independence and in that sense we become like God, the independent one. But false... we cannot live independently! Only God can. And we can never be like God in that way. We cannot live as our own gods...and live.

But the serpent's twisting of God's words twisted Eve's thinking. She concludes that God is withholding something she and Adam need. So she "took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband and he ate" (3:6). And they began to die.

So...review. How does the serpent part of the story "make sense" of our stories?

1. It reveals the nature of temptation. We are not initially tempted to do something overtly evil. We are tempted to doubt the goodness of God. And then doubting God's goodness, we are tempted to take charge of our own well-being and become the captains of our own destinies.

Imagine being out on a lake water-skiing. The tempter comes up along side disguised as a water-ski coach: tan, muscular, "No fear" printed on his swim

trunks. "Hey...how is it going? Do you like the boat driver? He says you have to hang on to the rope. Ever asked why? You do not see him hanging onto a rope, do you? Are you sure you can trust him? Nice enough guy. But can you trust him? Like, does he really care that you get the best ride possible? The first time he sees you really enjoying yourself, he will dump you. Besides, I am here to tell you, you do not need the rope. In fact, you do not need the boat!" Silly. But no more silly than what the serpent tempts us to think. "Loose your life for me and the Gospel." Right. See, I told you He does not want your best. "If you want to really live, be servant of all." Like, what is this noise? I am telling you...He does not want you to enjoy life like He does."

The nature of temptation.

2. The Story also reveals the nature of sin. Sin is not just disobedience. Sin is not just rebellion. Sin is not just ungodly deeds. At its root, sin is unbelief. Sin is not believing that God is as good as He say He is. Every particular sin is but the fruit of the prior sin of unbelief.

Why do we steal? Because we no longer believe God can or will take care of us, so we have to take matters into our own hands. Why do we lie? Because we no longer trust God to take care of us, if the truth be known, so we take matters into our own hands.

Every particular act of sin is, therefore, an insult on the character of God. "Sorry God, but this time You cannot be trusted. So I will have to be god right now."

3. Through the serpent part of the story, we also discover the nature of our nature. The nature of our nature once we decide God cannot be trusted. In choosing to live independently of God, we do not become independent creatures. We become dependent... on the self. A horrible captivity. The nature of our nature apart from God is ego-centricity. I hate it. I hate it when I see it in me. Ego-centricity: self at the center, self as master, self as source of wisdom and strength. Our fallen nature is not only expressed in evil thoughts and deeds. Our fallen nature is chiefly expressed in self-pre-occupation. We sinned into existence a creature never intended to exist: a creature centered in itself. A creature living around and for the self at the centre. The source of all our misery. The cause of war and injustice and poverty and ecological destruction. "I, me, mine, myself." The creed of humanity apart from God. The driving force of so much of our existence. Driving us into a deep mine from which we cannot free ourselves.

You may have seen the guest editorial in the Vancouver Sun last week (10-5-10). It was from the Ottawa Citizen. It was entitled "Secular Worship." We are the creature who worships; if not God, someone or something else. The editor argued that shopping and hoarding are the liturgical acts of a secular society. The editor writes: but "the psychology of hoarding points to a more profound malaise. Humans as theologians and philosophers have long argued, need a transcendent sense of meaning to give their lives purpose and intelligibility, and the question then is: How do you find such meaning in a secular, materialistic society?" The Ottawa Citizen is asking the question! And continues: "Perhaps it

is not surprising people project their human longing for significance into material possessions.....We 'worship' things. Watch a music video and you'll see jewelry and cars become objects of veneration." And then this: "People need to be careful in what they worship lest they **become** what they worship." The Ottawa Citizen speaking truth to the lie.

When the self becomes centre – god – we are not free. We become prisoners...to a god who cannot bear the weight of our worship. And we fall...into a deep mine. From which we cannot free ourselves. From which we need a Savior. Someone who in sacrificial love lays His Self aside. Someone who empties Himself of all His rightful privileges, and descends into the depths to bring us up into the freedom of self-less love.

4. Which brings us to the most important way the serpent part of the story "makes sense" of our stories. It poses the critical decision of our lives. Can I trust the Creator? That is: Who is right – the Creator or the Serpent? Is the Creator for me or not? Or is the serpent right? So much of life around us makes it hard to trust. I know. In a fallen world, so much seems to call into question the character of the creator. I know. And the serpent uses it all to mess with our minds, to encourage us to conclude the Creator cannot be trusted. "See...I told you...You are having a hard time just because He is not really for you. He does not want you to be alive and free."

The critical decision. Everyday. Can I trust the One who made me? Will I trust the One who made me?

Which is why the rest of the story leads us to feet of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we see who the Creator is; in Jesus, we see that the serpent is lying; in Jesus, we see that God is for us. Romans 8:32 "He did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" There is that word again – freely!

"Did God Say?" Eve should have said...as we need to say again and again:...Yes! God did say "you shall not." But, no! Not about the trees of the garden, of any tree of the garden we may freely eat. But of the tree of knowledge it makes us think we can live independently of God, we shall not die. For we were created dependent creatures. And in that trust I choose to live. I refuse your lie. In Jesus' name....Be gone. That's what she should have said.

Let's pray.