

Sermon: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 (Lent 1A)
Christ Church Riverdale, 10 February 2008
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^{NRS} **Genesis 2:15** The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ 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." **3:1** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ 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.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 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." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

I'd like you to do me a favor for a minute: think about anything you want, anything at all, anything in the whole world . . . except . . . a purple giraffe! Keep your mind on anything, just not a purple giraffe. Stop it! Why are you thinking about a purple giraffe? You've got millions of other things to think of!

From the moment we read that God says, "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," from that very moment we know . . . somebody's going to eat from that tree! As human beings, tell us not to do something, and we can't get it out of our minds, like the purple giraffe. "But what's wrong with eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?" we might ask. Why shouldn't we try to become wise in what's right and what's wrong? For one thing, wisdom isn't something we get from eating a piece of fruit, and for another, just as a child doesn't always understand why a parent says not to do something, so with people and God.

The serpent had pretty easy work that day, getting Eve and Adam to disobey and eat from the tree God had told them not to eat from. After all, the tree was enticing as only "forbidden fruit" can be. Now there's a long tradition of blaming Eve for Adam's fall--that she lured him to commit a sin he wouldn't have otherwise, but Genesis knows better. The text tells us that Eve ate the fruit and then gave some of it to her husband, *who was with her*, and he ate. The implication is that he was right there as the temptation unfolded.

When Eve 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, *then* she and Adam ate. Any wisdom the

tree had to offer ended up at the bottom of the list of why Eve took the fruit, after seeing it was good for food, and a delight to the eyes. It's been said that one of our fundamental problems in modern society is equating what we find pleasing with what is truly good. This is a distinction I'm trying to teach to my daughter Caroline, at places like the dinner table by asking her more and more, "Do you like it?" rather than, "Is it good?"

Now even though Adam and Eve didn't die that day they ate the fruit, in some sense they did die as a result of their disobedience. One of the chief consequences of sin is alienation, alienation from God and from one another. Once they ate from that fruit, it started—husband and wife become ashamed to be naked around each other. Later in the story, they try to hide from God, as if that were possible. As we become estranged from God, alienated from our human companions, a part of us dies. God made Adam and Eve out of love, created them. Human beings are creatures—finite creatures—but we don't always like it, and we can go to great lengths to deny it. But whenever people try to be more than human, more than God created us to be, trying to take God's place, they usually end up becoming less than God created us to be.

"There is nothing new under the sun," the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us, and so the same temptations are still with us today. Our trees of knowledge tend to come with picture screens--be they television or computer, large or small, PDA, cellphone, iPod, whatever. They offer enticements far more sophisticated than a just a serpent: they entertain us, and help us feel good, *and help us feel important*. We live in the information age, and there's a tendency to act as if up-to-date information is the most important thing in the world. It is not, and knowledge doesn't necessarily equal wisdom.

That doesn't stop people in various media from doing all they can to convince us that what they are offering is so important that we dare not miss it. "Must see TV" was only the tip of the iceberg; infotainment shows, tabloid programs, sports events--they all try to make themselves sound so important to us that we should care so deeply enough about them that we'll watch 15 minutes of commercials per hour in order to find out more. Even though the Internet is still in its adolescence, it does a great job of luring us in, convincing us that we desperately need the information it offers. And Blackberries—the PDAs that let us do e-mail from anywhere—they've been nicknamed "Crackberries" because they can be so addictive! Having access to email almost anywhere we go can tend to make us feel like we *need* to read email all the time, everywhere we go.

Now I'm not saying it's necessarily bad to watch a little television to use the Internet in moderation, or to take advantage of technology to keep in touch. I am saying that these are ways that our world tempts us, entices us. And they entice us in a way similar to what happened to Adam and Eve, because they tell us we don't know enough, that we have to know everything, that we aren't finite creatures of God. And like the events in the Garden of Eden, they alienate us. Some people have felt that they got along better with the characters on M*A*S*H or Cheers or Seinfeld--or pick a TV show from your generation--than their own families and friends. They alienate us when people pursue online relationships to the detriment of their human relationships close by. They alienate us when devices that are supposed to serve us subtly creep toward

having us serve them.

The enticements of the information age call us to a choice, a conscious decision of how we will lead our lives. Will we live in restlessness discontent over never having everything or knowing everything, or will we choose to rest in God and live in thankfulness for what we do have and we do know? Thankfulness that we have been lovingly created, even though we are finite, thankfulness for the abundance we have been given, even though we can't have everything or know everything. A thirst for knowledge is a God-given gift, but the information age too often offers knowledge with all the nuance of a firehose.

Wisdom is not something we get from eating a piece of fruit. In the category of "Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it," Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit starts them down a course of learning good and evil by experience, of gaining wisdom by matriculating at the school of hard knocks. This is the world you and I live in, not the childlike innocence of the Garden of Eden, but where learning good and evil--becoming wise--comes from making faithful decisions again and again in the face of temptation. We may not be able to avoid thinking about purple giraffes, but we can choose the good over the appealing, we can cultivate wisdom over mere knowledge, we can live toward relationship and God rather than restless alienation.