

On the day the Lord God made earth and sky— 5 before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew, because the Lord God hadn't yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being to farm the fertile land,⁶ though a stream rose from the earth and watered all of the fertile land— 7 the Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life.

15 The Lord God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it. 16 The Lord God commanded the human, "Eat your fill from all of the garden's trees; 17 but don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it, you will die!"

3 The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say that you shouldn't eat from any tree in the garden?"

2 The woman said to the snake, "We may eat the fruit of the garden's trees 3 but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, 'Don't eat from it, and don't touch it, or you will die.'"

4 The snake said to the woman, "You won't die! 5 God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."⁶ The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

8 During that day's cool evening breeze, they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God in the middle of the garden's trees. -Common English Bible

A child once asked me if the stories of the Bible are really true, clarifying by saying, "I mean, did they really happen? Were Adam and Eve real? Job, was he real?" I had an answer to these questions, but when I shared this story with a mentor he suggested a better answer, "Every day they happen. In every life. These stories are acted out every day."

When we open up the first chapters of Genesis we're reading pre-history, origin stories— whoever wrote them, or first told them around campfires, they weren't eyewitnesses to the beginning of all life. These are stories designed to teach truth about what it means to be human creatures, created for relationship with God and the world God made. Whether there really was a garden of Eden, a first man and a first woman made from his rib doesn't matter. In fact, if you have some time today I suggest you read chapter one and all of chapters two and three.

What you'll find there are two different accounts of creation. In Genesis one we have the seven day story, and in that story male and female are created at the same time, in the image of God, part of God's good creation. In Genesis two and three, the clock winds back, the sequence of events changes. The beginning of our Bible gives us two different ways to imagine human beginnings.

Given this, what seems to matter more is the consistent teaching across them that God is creator, and the world, and everything in the world, including us— is creation: creatures, dependent upon God for existence and sustenance, and beloved of God. Both stories suggest God's love of the creation to me— in the first God affirms the goodness of creation on each day of creating. In the second, God creates a beautiful garden and then brings forth a human being to care for that garden, and then, creates other living creatures, eventually a woman, to provide companionship and assistance to the first human being. God stays with the human beings in the garden, caring for the new life God has created. God made us and God loves us; and as we are reminded by the book of Job, God made and loves all creation, not just us.

Us. Human beings. Complicated creatures. And this is more of the truth that these first three chapters, especially those from which we read today, are trying to teach. We are the heirs of God's promise, those created to live in special relationship to the earth God made, affirmed as very good parts of this creation, given all good gifts to sustain life. And yet we are finite and limited, and often tempted to overcome or transgress our limitations. In the Garden of Eden this is symbolized by being told not to eat from one particular tree. All that was needed for survival, and indeed, more than survival, for delight— was contained in all the other plants of the garden; but one tree was off limits. The suggestion of God's command seems to be that the fruit of the forbidden tree brings the knowledge of good and evil, and death. Part of what I take from this is that to be human is to be limited— either in knowledge or in lifespan. We are limited. There's no way around it. Creatures, not creator.

And eventually the humans choose knowledge and death. I'm not interested in focusing too heavily on the snake. I'm not interested in placing blame. I'm interested in the fact that humans, good creatures of God, are so willing to choose death. We all do it. We humans, heirs of God's promise, so willingly turn our backs on God and God's promise for the sake of momentary pleasure, or power, or glory, or sometimes for revenge. Don't we? My mentor was right— did the story of Adam and Eve really happen? Every day it happens.

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But I want us to remember that this story suggests humans have the knowledge of good and evil— and that we are left with the task of ever discerning between them in the living of our lives. And we know this to be true, don't we? Every day. Hasn't this felt intense and acute for years now as the effects of climate change unfold, and viruses persist, and wars rage on, and messy elections keep popping up?

Several years ago I shared lunch with two colleagues who both happened to be serving churches in a suburb of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. They didn't know each other then, but became friends when God called them both to South Bend, Indiana. Though they didn't know each other, they had very similar stories to tell about the immense goodness and the immense evil that surfaced in the wake of that hurricane. Strangers helping to replace roofs. Strangers robbing elderly people blind. Human beings choosing good and human beings choosing evil. A fellow colleague said, "Disasters bring out the best and the worst in people."

23 years ago and a few days hence, on September 11, 2001 we glimpsed the consequences of a choice of evil and death, the grim potentiality of human hearts. We watched with horror as planes crashed, into buildings and a Pennsylvania field, as towers fell, and the Pentagon smoked. We also, quickly, glimpsed the immense good that humans can do as first responders ran into burning buildings, often sacrificing their own lives or at least their health in doing so. Even that crash in a field in Pennsylvania testifies to humans seeking to choose good when confronted with evil, sacrificing their own lives to save others.

But this isn't just a matter of big moments. On a much smaller scale, on our pilgrimage in Iona last month, I witnessed the consequences of choices made— when one teen chose vanity (a cute outfit and shoes over waterproof clothing) she ended up quite miserable— some of her peers chose to encourage her and to keep her moving forward, others chose to mock her, surely making her discomforts more acute. So many choices— some tilting towards good, some tilting towards evil— and so many consequences.

The heirs of God's promise are complicated, messy creatures who make daily choices and sometimes choose very, very badly. We are unlikely heirs, unsafe bets, but nonetheless are God's beloved creatures whom God trusts to care for God's creation. And by God's grace, we can choose life.

It is likely that you've witnessed some incidents of choosing life this week or this summer. I invite you to close your eyes and reflect on the past week or month. Did you see someone or

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did you yourself make a choice that turned life for the better? Did you see or undertake acts of kindness or compassion? Did you let go of substances or practices that were draining life? What have you witnessed or experienced? (*One minute of silent reflection.*) I'd like to invite you now to turn to someone near you or go into a breakout room on zoom and share some examples of humans choosing life— either your own choices or someone in your life or someone you witnessed through media.

Pause for discussion (5 minutes)

Keep watching for signs of chosen life. And you may even find that others will see you as such a sign too. Only you know what brings you life and what takes life from you. And being human means you get to choose over and over again. Why not choose life?