

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 1, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Genesis 3: 1-6
Matthew 4:1-11

Sermon: You will be like God (Lent 1)

When I had my first baby, the nurse in the delivery ward, a well-seasoned elder nurse named Jean, taught me how to “swaddle” baby Ruth. “Because” as she said, “If you wrap her up and hold her nice and tight, she will feel secure. Having her arms and legs waving around just makes her feel like everything is out of control. Babies don’t like that – they want to be held tight.”

The next day, in the baby side of the hospital, a much younger nurse named Brittany took me to task for wrapping my baby too tightly. “How is your baby ever going to grow strong if she cannot trust her own limbs?” she asked me. “She needs freedom to learn that she can move the way she wants.”

So begins the ongoing dilemma of parenthood – just when you think it is time for you to hold them tight, they need the freedom to do things on your own. And when you finally accept the fact that they need to stretch their wings, they come looking for clear boundaries to keep them safe.

Security and freedom; faith and control – these are just two of the polarized tensions we encounter in life – and not only in parenting.

The story of Eden in the book of Genesis is one of those Jewish stories from the Torah which is already so overlaid with Christian interpretations about sin and salvation – it’s hard to separate out the original intent of the story.

Reading Rabbi Jonathon Sacks, he interprets the story to be explaining God’s gift of freedom to humanity. God has already said that humanity is good – very good. Good enough, in fact, to be endowed with God’s own image and likeness. But with God’s likeness comes the eternal complication: if we are in God’s image, then we have received God’s own capacity for freedom – and with that freedom comes difference, and with difference comes the potential, even inevitability, for disobedience.

We might be, like the Adam first human, “dust of the earth,” says Sacks, but there is also within us the very “breath of God.” We are shaped by our environment, but we can also shape our environment. We are created, but we are also creative. No other life form known to us can choose how to act and how to react with the same level of freedom, the same creativity and the same drama as humanity.

That is good news, but also bad. As we hear in the story today, sometimes that freedom leads us to make poor choices. We can obey but are also free to disobey; we

can create harmony or we can create discord. The freedom to do good comes hand-in-hand with the freedom to do evil. We might listen and trust in God's infinite, abundant blessing – or we might decide that we can do better ourselves, and find ourselves in a self-made predicament.

That is what we hear in the story of Adam and Eve – and, of course, the snake, because we all need someone “other” to blame.

David Lose, a Lutheran minister, who also teaches preaching in Minneapolis, says that before there was ever an original sin, there must have been an “original insecurity.”

Adam and Eve were given a choice – not simply between this fruit and that fruit, or even slavish obedience versus outright rebellion. Eve and Adam were given a choice whether to trust in God, or to listen to that little voice of original insecurity. The voice that said to them: “Sure this garden is nice, but are you sure that God has everything in hand? What if you run out of food and the last food left is that forbidden tree there? Maybe you should go ahead and test it – then you will feel like you are in control – like you have everything in hand. You know, just in case there's a crisis, and God's not nearby.”

So, rather than trusting in God, Adam and Eve began to exploit the world around them – they were looking for something to quiet that insecurity, to calm that fear brought about by their inability to trust God.

They were given lives of peace and plenty. They were given love, companionship, creativity and freedom. Yet even in paradise, they have this deep unease, this sense that they are somehow incomplete, *unless they have complete control of the situation*. They are insufficient, unless they have every answer and test every possibility.

Of course, the serpent is there, ready to exploit that original insecurity for its own ends.

Like the advertisers who tell you that your car is too slow, your lawn is too weedy, your hair too grey – the serpent is there to sell Eve and Adam a solution long before they realized there was a problem.

"God has not told you everything," the serpent suggests. "Completeness, wholeness, self-sufficiency, mastery -- these are within your grasp."

And by naming their incompleteness, the serpent makes that insecurity real and concrete, drawing their attention to their faults, their lack of control, their need for security.

Of course, complete control was never within their grasp. With part of their make-up being “dust of the earth” there is also the part that is “breath of God.” THAT part can never be contained or controlled.

Rabbi Sacks suggested this “breath of God” element in us means that we are not creatures who are fated or destined to end up one thing or another. Our fate does not lie in the stars, nor in the human genome, or in any other form of determinism. We become what we choose to be. We know ourselves to be children of God, we are essentially free. No matter how the world shapes and confines us, we still can choose God’s goodness – to live in trust, generosity, compassion, and respect.

Deep in the wilderness, after forty days of starvation, Jesus endured the same insinuation from the tempter – the suggestion that God is not exactly trustworthy. “*If you really are the Son of God,*” the tempter began, “you should be in the garden of Eden, not out here starving in the desert...”

The tempter called Jesus’ relationship and trust in God into question and suggested that Jesus could do much better if he just had a little more control. .

But Jesus resisted the temptation to define himself as anything apart from God. *Who he is* IS always and will forever be connected to *whose* he is. Jesus belongs with God. Sometimes swaddled tight to God’s heart through prayer or spirituality or service. At other times, flying free, experimenting with new ways of seeing the world and exploring great possibility, but never truly disconnected from the One who loves him as a son.

What are the things that tempt us today? They are usually things that either promise to fill that gaping hole in our insecurity – or the cutting edge thing that promises to free us from the responsibilities that weigh us down.

As we enter into this season of Lent, we are called to find the best balance, to set our Spirits free, even as we dive deeper into our connection with our Creator.

In the name of Jesus, who endured temptation - and who prevailed against all distrust and disconnection, hear this word of the Gospel: You are a beloved child of God, you are forgiven, redeemed, renewed, and called to a life of wholeness – even if you find yourself in the wilderness. Let us leave this place in peace and hope, that we might build, out of our wilderness, a paradise intended to serve and nourish every child of God in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.