

Sermon: The Fracture

Series: Genesis, Over and Over Again

Scripture Reading: Genesis 3:1-7

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Preacher: Rev. Jasiel Hernandez Garcia



As we embark on a summer-long journey exploring the intriguing and sometimes controversial book of Genesis, I would like us to start by pondering the following question: “If you could summarize the Book of Genesis in a sentence or two, what would you share?”

Think about it for a moment.

It is difficult, isn’t it?

Genesis contains so much information!

There are so many fascinating tales and epic moments; so many unforgettable characters, strange landscapes, family feuds, acts of courage, and deeds of deception. Genesis is filled with people at their best and at their worst.

What holds all these stories together is not the virtue of the people involved, but the constancy of a God who appears to have a plan for each and every situation.

My hope for this summer at First Presbyterian Church is that those of us who grew up hearing these stories in Sunday school will discover them anew, with fresh wonder and deeper appreciation.

And for those who may be encountering these stories for the first time, my hope is that they will awaken a curiosity that grows into a hunger—a hunger to hear what Scripture has to say about God, about ourselves, and about the fractured relationship between the two that is held together by a love stronger than anything else in all creation.

Before we read today's Scripture and learn more about the Fall of humankind, I would like to start this sermon series by addressing some assumptions about the book of Genesis.

One of the most insightful novelists and theological thinkers of our time, Marilynne Robinson, published a compelling reflection on Genesis in 2024. If you appreciate thoughtful writing and are willing to wrestle with profound theological and historical questions, I highly recommend it. Some of the ideas and insights shaping this sermon series draw on her work.

Robinson summarizes Genesis in the following words: *a meditation on the problem of evil and a defense of God's goodness and relentless, persistent loyalty to a profoundly flawed humanity.*

And perhaps that observation raises an important question.

If Genesis is fundamentally concerned with God's goodness and humanity's brokenness, then how should we read these ancient stories? What kind of truth are they trying to communicate?

Before we can understand Genesis, we must first consider how Genesis asks to be understood.

One important theme throughout this series will be the tension between reading Genesis through a purely secular lens and reading it through the eyes of faith. Robinson addresses this tension beautifully, describing many modern readings of Genesis as resting on what she calls "lazy assumptions."

Certainly, the Hebrew Scriptures share some literary features with the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel. We can recognize echoes of Babylonian creation stories and flood narratives.

Yet Genesis does something remarkably different with those familiar themes.

Unlike the Babylonian myths, Genesis declares that human beings are created good - in the image of God and are therefore endowed with dignity, worth, and purpose.

Unlike the often capricious and violent gods of the ancient world, the God of Genesis is purposeful, relational, and profoundly concerned with creation's flourishing.

Many ancient myths are characterized by their distance from ordinary human experience. Their worlds are populated by cosmic battles, divine rivalries, and fantastical events disconnected from everyday life.

Genesis, by contrast, unfolds through the ordinary rhythms of human existence: births and deaths, marriages and migrations, sibling rivalries and family tensions, moments of faith and moments of failure.

This is why Genesis cannot be reduced to one more ancient creation myth.

Whether every passage is intended as literal history is not the primary question. The deeper question is whether these stories bear truthful witness to God's relationship with humanity.

So how does Genesis want to be understood?

Perhaps as the starting point of a relationship - think of it as when two different individuals begin to develop a bond of love and friendship. Genesis discloses how God has been calling humanity into relationship, and that the drama of Scripture is the story of God and humanity finding their way back to one another again and again.

So that's where we will begin this sermon series: the moment when our relationship with God became fractured.

SCRIPTURE READING

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,[a] 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.

One of Robinson's most interesting observations of this story is that the serpent does not tempt Eve with pleasure as one would expect.

The serpent tempts Eve with knowledge.

There are multiple surveys and studies, especially those conducted by the Barna Group, that show that when given the choice between knowing more and indulging more, the majority of people choose indulgence.

This reminds me of the famous proverb that says, "Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he'll eat for a lifetime."

What these studies reveal is that we, as a people, are more interested in using pleasure to alleviate issues concerning boredom, purpose, and stress than in finding long-lasting solutions to them.

We would rather eat the fish today and satisfy our hunger than spend time learning how to fish for long-term sustainability.

This is why I find it interesting that the very first act of rebelliousness from humankind would be the search for knowledge.

Why do Eve and Adam need to know more?

They both lived in the abundant and joyful Garden of Eden. Scripture tells us that all their needs were met. They had a close relationship with God. They lived in harmony and peace with all creation.

So, why?

Why would someone risk that kind of stability and joy for knowing what is good and what is evil?

Robinson argues that the issue is not that Adam and Eve seek knowledge; throughout Genesis, human beings are portrayed as intelligent and capable. The issue is that they seek a kind of knowledge that belongs to God alone—the authority to judge reality from the center rather than from within creation.

John Calvin, in his commentary on this text, states how the root of sin is humanity's refusal to stay within the limits of our creaturehood.

What the serpent does so effectively in this story is to place doubt first in Eve and then in Adam. The serpent plants the idea that they can be so much more than mere creatures dependent upon their Creator.

Beneath the promise of knowledge lies a deeper promise: control.

And boy, oh, boy! Don't we all want control? Control over our lives. Control over situations that affect our lives. Control over other people's lives. And even control over how God relates to us.

Renowned contemporary Bible Scholar Walter Brueggemann often wrote that sin is the refusal to live in dependence. That tree in the Garden of Eden represents humanity's desire to seize all moral autonomy so that we can become more like God and less than just another creature.

The temptation ultimately results in needing God less.

The serpent suggests that life would be better if they no longer had to trust God, if they could determine for themselves what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is false.

I can almost hear the same temptation these days:

- "Trust yourself."
- "Your truth is the only truth."
- "Follow your truth at the expense of others."
- "You know better."
- "Nobody can tell you what's right."

When we start to believe that we know better than everybody else, we begin, little by little, to replace God with ourselves.

And that, my friends, is known as idolatry.

The tragedy of Eden is that Adam and Eve already possessed everything they needed: a relationship with God, meaningful work, a loving relationship, and a place of great leadership within creation.

Yet the serpent convinced them that these gifts were somehow insufficient. Somehow, Adam and Eve believed that what God had provided them was simply not enough.

And isn't that how temptation still works today?

Think about it.

Temptation makes its way into our lives through whispers that say, God hasn't given you:

- Enough love
- Enough success
- Enough recognition
- Enough security
- Enough certainty
- Enough control

The serpent's greatest achievement was not convincing Adam and Eve to eat the fruit. The serpent's greatest achievement, as Robinson puts it, was convincing them to doubt the goodness of God.

Church, when voices around us begin telling us that God's gifts are not enough, that God's goodness in our lives is not enough, we should be very careful.

When voices tell us that we need more power, more control, more certainty, more status, more influence before we can finally be at peace, we should recognize the ancient echo of the serpent in the garden. Because the tempter is as active today as it was then.

This Genesis story reminds us and warns us that the life of faith has never been about becoming more like God. It has always been about becoming fully human before God, dependent on God.

So, this Sunday we end with the same question the tree in Eden has asked every generation:

Will we believe the serpent's lie? Or will we choose to trust God?